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ABSTRACT

The number of dropouts is increasing and is particularly high in urban areas and among minority students. Dropouts earn less over their lifetimes, are in poorer health, and do not have the technological skills needed for newly-developing jobs. The federal government, the private sector, and educators have made serious commitments to bring down the dropout rate. In this two-part document the Urban Superintendents Network presents possible solutions to this problem. Part One discusses the dropout problem and presents the superintendents' action plan for lowering the dropout rate. Part Two describes six strategies that the superintendents believe hold promise for keeping at-risk students in school. The recommendations are the following: (1) anti-dropout programs should intervene early in the lives and school careers of at-risk youngsters; (2) a positive school climate must be created in schools with adequate personnel; (3) school districts must set high attendance, academic, and discipline expectations; (4) strong teachers should be developed and hired; (5) districts should provide a broad range of instructional programs tailored for at-risk students; and (6) all people, organizations, and institutions should organize collaborative efforts to improve schools and lower the dropout rate. The superintendents plan to form six action groups to address the problem and to share information. The report also includes descriptions of effective dropout programs; a bibliography, and a list of contact persons and agencies. (VM)

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Dealing with Dropouts:

The Urban Superintendents' Call to Action

Office of Educational Research and Improvement
U.S. Department of Education

November 1987

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Dealing with Dropouts:

The Urban Superintendents' Call to Action

by the OERI Urban Superintendents Network

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Office of Educational Research and Improvement
November 1987

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Introduction

Few issues in American education have generated more public debate or greater activity than the dropout problem. Congress has proposed dropout prevention legislation which, if passed, would authorize Federal funds to assist dropout-plagued school districts. Dropout prevention plans are sailing through State legislatures. The private sector is devoting energy and resources to keeping adolescents in school until graduation. The education profession has made a similar commitment to bring down the dropout rate.

The fact that nearly 3,800 youngsters are thought to leave school each day has also caught the attention of the Urban Superintendents Network, a group of public school administrators from major cities throughout the Nation. Under the sponsorship of the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI), these superintendents meet two or three times a year with OERI staff, education researchers, and practitioners to discuss issues of importance to them. At the superintendents' meetings held in 1986 and 1987, the dropout problem headed their list of concerns. Through the years, the Network's gatherings have allowed superintendents to exchange information and learn from each other. At these recent meetings, the superintendents and their staff agreed that their experience and knowledge might also benefit others—educators, policymakers, business leaders, parents, and citizens— currently grappling with the dropout problem.

The superintendents and Department officials recognize that the recent debate has generated several publications that discuss why youngsters drop out and what might help them to succeed in school. But this booklet, *Dealing With Dropouts: The Urban Superintendents' Call to Action*, makes a special contribution. These school leaders spend their lives on education's front lines, coping with at-risk students and their crises. The urban superintendents' views—offered not necessarily as solutions but as ideas—are based on many years of practical experience.

The booklet is divided into two parts. Part 1 discusses the dropout problem and presents the superintendents' action plan for a joint effort to keep more youngsters in school until graduation and to develop more productive citizens. Part 2 describes six strategies the superintendents believe hold promise for keeping at-risk students in school —not only in urban public schools, but in suburban and in rural ones, too. The urban superintendents recommend intervening early in the lives of at-risk youngsters, creating a positive school climate in which youngsters can learn, setting high expectations, selecting and developing strong teachers, providing a broad range of instructional programs, and initiating collaborative efforts to reduce the dropout rate. The superintendents also describe in this booklet a range of policies and practices, currently in place in their districts, that illustrate each strategy. These examples are not all unique to the school district identified; some are replicated in other districts across the country. References are supplied at the end of Part 2, along with a list of contacts in each of the districts for readers wanting more information.

The U.S. Department of Education and members of the Urban Superintendents Network recognize that many ideas exist on how to reduce the dropout rate. The superintendents themselves, representing a range of public school districts and students, do not share identical views on how best to do so. This booklet presents strategies, policies, and practices on which most of them do agree. Nor does the U.S. Department of Education necessarily endorse all of these strategies. Nonetheless, we at the Department salute the superintendents' efforts to present their thoughts on a problem that concerns all of us and to make their ideas accessible to the American people. This indeed is a worthy step toward improving American education.

The energies and knowledge of many individuals inside and outside OERI have gone into creating this publication. The coordinator of the Urban Superintendents Network, Sue Gruskin, as well as team members Mary Campbell and former Network member Gordon McAndrew, did an impressive job working with the superintendents and their staffs to represent their views and in researching and helping to prepare the manuscript, which Nancy Paulu wrote and edited. David Mack, Director of the Educational Networks Division, and Milton Goldberg, Director of Programs for the Improvement of Practice, provided leadership and direction at critical points throughout the project. We also thank Phil Kaufman for supplying necessary statistics and for preparing charts. We particularly wish to thank the superintendents who took time to share their ideas and hopes for their students. Without their help, this handbook could not have been written. Thanks also go to the many school district program staff members who provided issue briefs and program descriptions, reviewed summaries and manuscripts, and answered endless questions.

We also wish to acknowledge the assistance of Erwin Flaxman and Carol Ascher at the ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education for their literature search and for their help in structuring the publication and in providing preliminary drafts. Numerous others inside and outside the Department offered their advice and guidance. I am grateful to all those mentioned here and to others cited in the acknowledgments at the end of this booklet.

Chester E. Finn, Jr.
Assistant Secretary for
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Executive Summary

In school districts from Boston to Los Angeles to Honolulu, educators are striving to improve American schools and to lower the dropout rate. "Educators cannot be expected to meet these challenges alone," the members of the Urban Superintendents Network explain in this handbook, *Dealing With Dropouts: The Urban Superintendents' Call to Action.* "Entire communities must mobilize to assure that their youngsters become successful, productive members of the community and competent future leaders."

This publication invites everyone concerned about America's children—and the future of our Nation—to join hands in this effort. It presents the superintendents' blueprint to develop more productive citizens and keep more youngsters in school until high school graduation. The superintendents plan to form six action groups to address various aspects of the dropout problem and to share information about worthwhile dropout prevention programs. These groups will include educators, policymakers, and representatives of business, industry, and community agencies, as well as others concerned about the dropout problem.

The booklet also outlines six strategies being used to lower the dropout rate in some of the country's largest urban school districts. The superintendents have furnished descriptions of programs and policies used in their districts that illustrate each strategy.

First, the urban superintendents recommend that educators intervene early in the lives of at-risk youngsters by providing good preschool and early childhood programs and by monitoring students' progress. Second, they suggest that educators create positive school climates with effective principals and adequate personal attention for at-risk students. Third, the superintendents urge all schools and school districts to set high attendance, academic, and discipline expectations. Fourth, they recommend that districts select and develop strong teachers. Fifth, they urge districts to provide a broad range of instructional programs tailored for students at risk of dropping out—for instance, work experience programs and ones for non-English speaking youngsters. Sixth, they recommend that all people, organizations, and institutions concerned about at-risk youngsters initiate collaborative efforts to improve schools and to lower the dropout rate. The superintendents do not pretend to have definitive cures for all at-risk students' problems. Instead, the strategies they propose are their "best bets" to keep students in school and provide them with a sound education.

1

Part 1

A Call To Action

The Problem

The dropout problem has engaged the minds and hearts of Americans. Parents, educators, business executives, and policymakers all believe that leaving school profoundly handicaps the dropouts themselves and the entire Nation. Newspapers, television programs, congressional committees, state legislatures, and local school boards unanimously agree that something must be done, but the question is, What?

In the 1985–86 school year alone, the most recent for which reliable figures are available, 682,000 American teenagers dropped out of school—an average of 3,789 each day.[1] In urban school districts from Boston to Los Angeles to Honolulu, up to half of all students entering ninth grade fail to graduate 4 years later. Moreover, the dropout problem may loom still larger in the future. By the year 2000, blacks and Hispanics—two of the minority groups most prone to leave school—will compose one-third of those enrolled in public schools.

For most of the 682,000, dropping out will thwart dreams and frustrate expectations. Well-paying jobs for those failing to graduate have dwindled as the Nation has moved from an agrarian to a manufacturing to a service economy. More sophisticated skills are needed in our increasingly complex technological age, consigning more dropouts to the low end of the economic ladder. Males who drop out are estimated to earn $441,000 less during their lives than male high school graduates (U.S. Department of Commerce). Recent research suggests that GED (General Educational Development) certificate-holders do not fare as well as regular high school graduates in the labor market or at higher education, which may indicate that the two credentials are not equal (Baker, et al., p. 265; Fields, p. 30; Quinn and Haberman, pp. 72–82). In 1986, the unemployment rate for young adult dropouts from 16 to 24 years old was double that of high school graduates. Those with fewer than 12 years of schooling compose a large part of the long-term unemployed.

Leaving school can take a devastating human toll. A recent Gallup poll found that 23 percent of the respondents with less than a high school diploma were dissatisfied with their personal lives, compared with 14 percent of all respondents and only 6 percent of college graduates. Not surprisingly, many dropouts, even when surveyed shortly after leaving school, believed their decision to do so was a mistake. Dropouts even tend to have poorer health.

[1]The dropout estimate of 682,000 is based on information from the October 1986 Current Population Survey conducted by the Bureau of the Census. The daily average was obtained by dividing the number of dropouts between October 1985 and October 1986 by 180 school days.

A15

But the price of dropping out also extends into the public realm. Dropouts cost American taxpayers many billions in lost local, state, and federal tax revenues. Nor are all the costs in dollars. Seventy-one percent of prison inmates never completed high school. Dropouts become heads of households, where the cycles of their own lives are repeated. Uneducated adolescents become unskilled or semiskilled workers who cannot contribute fully in education, science, business, and industry.

Superintendents Respond

During the past year, these sobering realizations drew together superintendents from 32 major urban public school districts which together educate approximately 4.6 million students. Under the auspices of the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement, members of the Urban Superintendents Network and their representatives met several times to discuss how best to guide dropout-prone youngsters along the often rocky path toward graduation. They also shared practices and policies currently helping at-risk youngsters in their own districts. Members acknowledged that the dropout problem doesn't lend itself to quick, piecemeal, or easy solutions. They realize that it results from diverse societal forces over which schools have only partial control. Thomas Payzant, superintendent of the San Diego City Schools, recognizes that aspects of the problem are beyond the school's control when he observes, "We have 115,000 kids coming through the school door each day—some of them hungry, in poor health, or with emotional bruises from the night before."

Despite such obstacles, the superintendents believe they can and must provide strong leadership to improve schools and to lower the dropout rate. To that end, they pooled their many years of experience with at-risk students to develop this booklet. It features the ideas, strategies, programs, and practices they think will help youngsters graduate. More significantly, this booklet is a clarion call for the Nation to develop more productive citizens and to lower the dropout rate.

It invites all Americans to work together on a problem that threatens our individual productivity and collective welfare. We must all fight this problem: educators, parents, businesses, communities, and health and social service agencies, along with local, state, and federal policymakers.

Children, including those most at-risk, do not just "grow up." As *First Lessons*, a 1986 U.S. Department of Education report on elementary education, states:

> *[Children] must be raised by the community of adults—all adults. The community should accept as its solemn responsibility—as a covenant—the nurture, care, and education of the coming generation.*

No one disputes that America's children are her greatest resource and that the responsibility of nurturing them falls on all of us. Some commentators, however, point out that much of the current debate overlooks long-term enrollment trends. While only 75 percent of all high school students graduate on time, about 86 percent eventually earn a

diploma or its equivalent. They believe this percentage is impressive when compared with figures from past decades. In 1940, the proportion of 25-to-29-year-olds who had completed at least 4 years of high school stood at 38 percent; it increased by 1960 to 61 percent; and by 1975 had escalated to 83 percent (Finn, p. 7). The growth in minority students earning a diploma has been similar.

Moreover, despite the marked economic benefits a diploma bestows, some argue that in contemporary America not every job requires a high school education. They believe that all youngsters should be offered the opportunity to earn a high school diploma, but for some of them the choice not to do so may be reasonable.

The superintendents have not ignored this information. But they still believe the Nation must lower the dropout rate by meeting the needs of at-risk students. They cite demographic changes, which make the need to move rapidly all the more critical. In the next decade, most growth in the school-aged population is expected to occur among the poor, blacks, and Hispanics—the groups whose members now are most likely to drop out. In this trend all Americans have an interest, for it could affect the economic futures of us all. In 1950, 17 workers backed each retiree's social security; by 1992, just three workers will back each social security check—and one of the three will be a minority group member (Hodgkinson, p. 5).

The superintendents agree that public pressure to lower the dropout rate should not tempt educators to water down standards in order to graduate more students. On the contrary, academic and behavior expectations must be kept high. Dallas General Superintendent Linus Wright explains:

> *Watering down standards only exacerbates the dropout problem because students who have not mastered basic academic skills tend to drop out or—even worse—graduate at a skill level that does not reflect a high school education.*

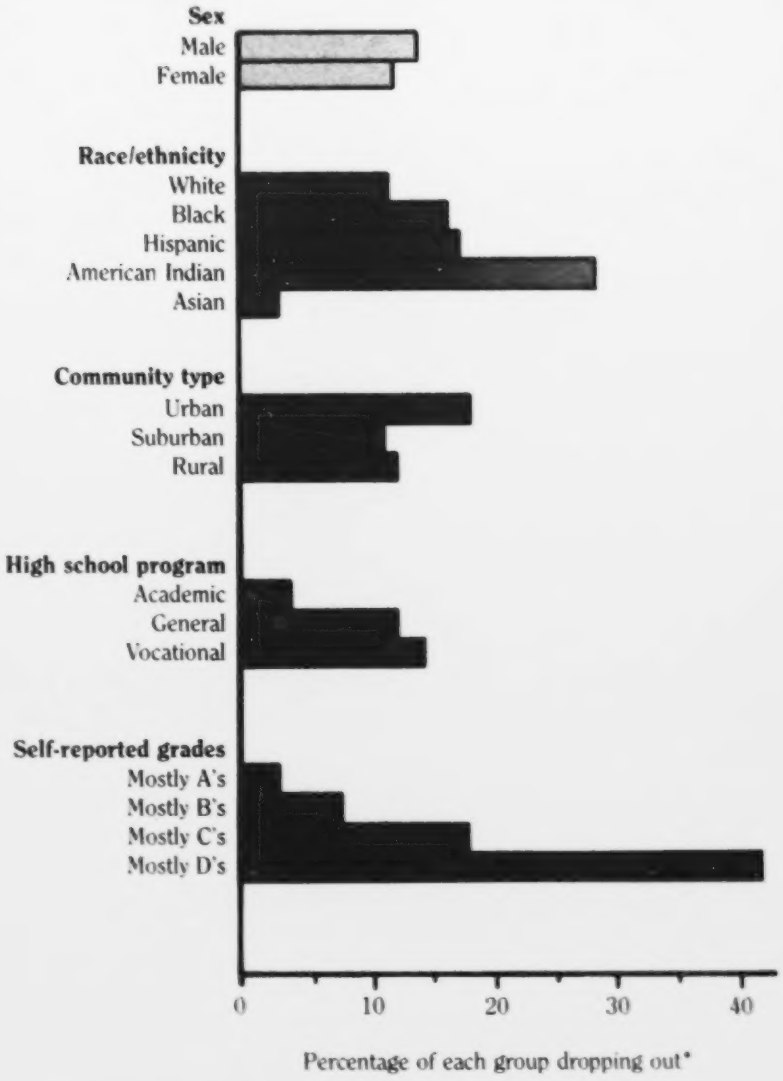
But at the same time educators must be alert to telltale signs that a student is at risk of dropping out and provide special help to students for whom traditional programs alone are insufficient.

At-Risk Students—Who Are They?

Poor academic performance is the single best predictor of who drops out. D and F students are more apt to leave than those earning A's or B's. Students who have repeated a grade stand a far greater chance of leaving school than those who proceed from grade to grade on schedule. Teens in the vocational and general tracks are more inclined to drop out than those in the academic track. (Figure.) Teens who hold time-consuming jobs are more likely to drop out than those who work fewer hours or not at all.

Misbehavior while in school can signal trouble. Students who have been suspended, are chronically truant, or have been in conflict with the law have a higher-than-average chance of dropping out.

Figure—Percentages of various groups of 1980 high school sophomores who dropped out before graduation



* 1980 sophomores who, by 1982, had dropped out of high school.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, Center for Education Statistics, High School Dropouts: Descriptive Information from High School And Beyond, 1983.

Demographics also provide clues to who will leave school. Males drop out more than females. Blacks, Hispanics, and American Indians are more apt to drop out than whites or Asian Americans. Adolescents whose parents lack a high school diploma are at greater risk than those from better educated families. Urban students are more apt to drop out than rural or suburban students. Teens from homes where activities are not monitored and with fewer study aids and opportunities for nonschool learning are less apt to graduate. Students from one-parent homes drop out more often than those with both parents present. Students are more apt to drop out if they lack consistent support and encouragement from family and community members who share common values and standards. Teenage mothers (and fathers) leave school far more often than adolescents without children.

But poverty is the overwhelming demographic predictor of who will drop out; students from the bottom third in family income stand a far greater chance of leaving school than teens from middle class or affluent families. And when socioeconomic factors are controlled, the differences across racial, ethnic, geographic, and other demographic lines blur. Manford Byrd, Jr., general superintendent of the Chicago Public Schools, observes, "If you're really talking about what would reduce the dropout rate the most, it would be getting the daddies of our kids a job."

What the Dropouts Say

The dropouts themselves provide telling insights. In one U.S. Department of Education survey of students from the class of 1980, the largest number of dropouts said they left school because of poor grades. Other key reasons, in this order, were that they didn't like school, preferred to work, got married or planned to, couldn't get along with their teachers, got pregnant, had to support families, or were expelled.

Dropouts surveyed last year in San Diego described school-related factors that lead to their decision. Their responses are typical of what one hears from dropouts throughout the Nation:

I left because of overall boredom. I wanted to get on with my life.

The teachers and counselors told me I was stupid.

Not much individual help.

I needed more challenging classes.

I didn't like [the school]. I hated it there. It felt like a dummy zoo.

The dropouts also suggested what the district could have done to retain them in school:

More understanding by teachers.

Teachers could have been more helpful.

Needed more support from teachers.

Work at my own speed.

Classes are too big.

[School] should be set up to help the student prepare for their [sic] future. Get a good job.

Have stronger discipline—more consistent.

A survey of Detroit dropouts suggests that peer pressure may push at-risk students out the schoolhouse door: One-half of those who dropped out reported that one or more of their close friends had also left school prematurely. Other research shows that long before students decide to drop out, peers often discourage them from succeeding academically. Lillian Kyser, a Detroit student who cochairs the district's student effort on dropout prevention, explains:

> *I was an honor roll student who was an active participant in class—did well on tests, did my homework. This bothered some of the students who were not successful, and they tried to get me to join them. When I didn't, they called me a "nerd." I was so angry and hurt, but they made me more determined to participate and succeed.... I know there are other students out there who are being influenced by this negative peer pressure.*

Peer pressure to do poorly in school appears to be particularly acute among black males: One recent study reported that some masked academic strides to avoid being accused of "acting white."

Indeed, intermingling factors influence who stays in school and who leaves. Many students drop out because of the cumulative effects of too many negatives such as years of living in poverty, growing up with an alcoholic parent, the lack of positive role models, drug use, poor grades, feelings of hopelessness and helplessness, an overall feeling of alienation from school, and, finally, a hallway tussle with a classmate that leads to suspension.

Six Strategies

Some of these factors are associated with the schools themselves. But being school-related does not necessarily mean they are school-caused. This makes schools' efforts to serve at-risk students all the more challenging. Bearing this caveat in mind, the Urban Superintendents Network offers its six "best bets," detailed in Part 2 of this booklet, for keeping these youngsters in school and for helping them to achieve while they are there.

1. Intervene early. Signs that a child is at risk of having academic difficulties can appear even before he or she starts kindergarten. Therefore, educators must monitor the academic and social progress of children carefully and early—and provide special help before years of academic failure have eroded a youngster's self-esteem and left him or her woefully behind in school. Helping children develop competence and confidence in their ability to learn is a good way to instill a desire to learn and to prepare for a lifetime of learning.

2. Create a positive school climate. Evidence strongly suggests that this is perhaps the best way educators can encourage students to stay enrolled and to learn. Good schools possess strong leaders who stress academic achievement, maintain an orderly and disciplined environment, and work with staff to instill positive values and self-confidence in students.

3. Set high expectations. Research consistently shows that educators who expect students to maintain high standards for attendance, academics, and behavior get more in return. However, expectations must be realistic, and at-risk students must receive the support they need to meet them.

4. Select and develop strong teachers. Teachers exert tremendous influence in students' education and attitudes toward school. Therefore, a concerted effort must continually be made to select and train good teachers who are sensitive to the needs of at-risk students.

5. Provide a broad range of instructional programs to accommodate students with diverse needs. A pregnant 12-year-old and a habitually truant 16-year-old require different forms of assistance and cannot always be expected to benefit from the same program.

6. Initiate collaborative efforts to develop and administer dropout prevention programs. Schools, communities, churches, and families all influence what and how much students learn as well as whether or not they attend school. Hence jointly planned and administered programs are often needed.

Six Action Groups

These strategies together hold promise. Most districts already employ at least some of them, but all need to seek aggressively the most appropriate combination for their schools. To encourage more to do so, the superintendents plan to form six action groups to work on the six strategies and share information on worthwhile dropout prevention programs. Each group will examine accountability for and assessment of performance in classrooms, schools, and school districts. The six groups will include urban and non-urban educators, policymakers, and representatives of business, industry, and community agencies, as well as others concerned about the dropout problem.

Each of the six groups will attempt to answer three key questions within its area.

1. What do we know? Given the interest in and the seriousness of the problem, it is surprising that we have so little reliable information about what works with at-risk students. Therefore, each group will analyze what is already known in its study area and will keep tabs on dropout programs, policies, and practices that show particular promise. Each group will also identify what is not effective. They will work with organizations addressing the same issue and with the Department of Education to share information about their work with those who might need it. Finally, each group will collect information on the cost effectiveness of various dropout prevention strategies and alert districts to their financial advantages and pitfalls. Group members might also recommend ways to reallocate existing resources to serve at-risk students.

2. What must we learn? Replacing current practice with better practice requires continuing research. The superintendents admit that too often they must make policy decisions based on rough judgments of what seems to work. Therefore, they will select research questions to be studied by them or others with more resources: school districts' research and evaluation staffs, foundations, or local, state, or federal agencies. Pertinent research questions might include the following:

- Why do students from poor families drop out more often than students from middle-class families? Why do some poor youngsters succeed while others do not? What in their backgrounds and school experiences helps them to succeed?
- How does the structure of a school affect the dropout rate? For example, is it better to have elementary, junior high, and high schools? Or is it preferable to have just two school levels—an elementary school extending through the 8th grade and a high school accommodating 9th through 12th grade?

- Are students whose parents can choose the school they attend and the type of academic program in which they enroll less apt to drop out?
- What impact does raising academic standards have on at-risk students?
- Do we have suitable education assessment systems in place, including those that tip us off to youngsters with a higher-than-average likelihood of dropping out?
- Does counseling as it is now structured in most schools help the dropout problem?
- What tactics can help ease the transition of an at-risk student who is moving from school to school?
- How can peer pressure to fail in school be overcome?
- How can peer pressure be used to help at-risk students succeed in school?
- Is it better to separate at-risk students from classmates in special "pull out" programs or keep them in the same classes?
- What effect does establishing magnet schools have on the dropout rate?
- What effect does grouping students according to academic ability have on the dropout rate?
- What aspects of the student-teacher relationship are most influential in keeping students in school? For example, how important are teachers' expectations? Or teachers' spoken and unspoken messages?
- What effects do various instructional and school management strategies have on keeping youngsters in school?
- What are the best ways to draw dropouts back to school? What characteristics do those who return share? What programs can best serve those who return?
- What discipline policies affect the dropout rate?
- What are the effects of longer school days and school years?

3. What should we do? Assessing what we know and participating in research help form sound educational policy and practice. However, some superintendents believe that most dropout prevention programs represent mere tinkering with the system—and that major inroads into the dropout problem require a fundamental restructuring of public education. The urban public school superintendents agree that we cannot assume that the present organization of schools is the best way to educate young people. Therefore, the action groups will make appropriate recommendations on issues such as the following:

- **Compulsory education.** In 75 percent of all States, young people may leave school at age 16—for most students long before high school graduation. Is there merit to raising the age at which a teenager may leave school? Or to providing students with more time in class? Or to lengthening the school year? Or to admitting that leaving school may be appropriate for some students as long as they have sufficient skills and confidence to support themselves?
- **School admission age.** In most States, children start school at age 5. Given the recent changes in the American family structure, should schooling start earlier? If so, should early childhood education be voluntary or mandatory? Would the public schools necessarily be responsible for it? How might it be financed?
- **Choice.** Most public school systems are organized into attendance zones, and students are assigned by geographic boundaries. But more and more districts afford choices to parents and students. Should families have more to say about where their children attend school? Would such "empowerment" reduce the dropout rate by making schools more attractive? Should school districts be encouraged to establish different kinds of schools to accommodate the great variety of city dwellers? Would a system that allowed parents and their children to choose among public schools help to hold more young people in school?
- **Residential schools.** Should States be encouraged to establish residential schools for at-risk young people? Would the costs be offset by savings in other areas?
- **Flexibility.** What kinds of flexible programs and schedules help at-risk students?
- **Reallocation of resources.** Should school districts shift their resources to provide more money for at-risk students?
- **Accountability.** Should schools be more responsible for the progress of their students? Should the schools get more autonomy in exchange for greater accountability for student achievement? What incentives can be used to reward schools that lower their dropout rate?

Common Definition of Dropout Needed

The six action groups, each charged with the responsibility of answering three key questions, provide a good way to begin tackling the dropout problem. But the superintendents agree that any comprehensive effort also requires educators and policymakers together to develop a common definition of a dropout. Knowing exactly whom we are talking about is a prerequisite to developing prevention programs. Yet school districts and States define dropouts differently and collect data in different ways, making the dropout figures available today unreliable.

Most superintendents accept a definition recommended by a task force of the Council of Chief State School Officers. The task force describes a dropout as

> *A pupil who leaves school, for any reason except death, before graduation or completion of a program of studies and without transferring to another school.*

But this definition leaves many questions unanswered. For instance, how long must a student be out of school without reentering the same or another public or private school before being considered a dropout? Twenty days? Forty days? Should a student who leaves school for prison be considered a dropout? What about a young person who leaves school but pursues an education in the military? The superintendents recognize that these and other questions are important for educators and policymakers to address. However, this task lies outside the scope of this publication.

Program Evaluations Needed

Finally, the superintendents recognize that more and better long-range evaluations are needed. Thus far few dropout prevention programs have been independently evaluated to provide solid evidence of what works with at-risk youngsters. Districts must analyze the cost of programs and collect data on their impact. For instance, educators need to learn whether a particular program has improved students' self-esteem, attendance, behavior, and academic achievement. They also need to know how parents, teachers, and students perceive the program.

An Invitation to Action

The superintendents believe that the time to act on the dropout problem is now. We cannot afford to stall while part of a generation is lost. For many disadvantaged students, a high school education is the best ticket to more fulfilling work and to richer lives. As teachers coax these youngsters toward this goal, the superintendents urge educators not to lose sight of what is and should remain their primary mission. This is to provide all students, including potential dropouts, with a solid academic program that will enable them to contribute to society when they graduate. A diploma is meaningless if students haven't learned to read, write, think, speak, and compute. Cincinnati Superintendent Lee Etta Powell explains:

> *[I]t is crucial to assure that young people eligible to enter the work force are educated and well trained with the . . . skills necessary to become . . . contributing members of society.*

Improving schools and lowering the dropout rate require additional resources and broad-based collaboration. Educators cannot be expected to meet these challenges alone. Entire communities must mobilize to assure that their youngsters become successful, productive members of the community and competent future leaders. A recent report from the Committee on Economic Development, comprising the Nation's top business executives, agrees with this view and urges businesses to encourage financial support for early intervention programs and for public education. The superintendents welcome this willingness to help find solutions to the dropout problem. Leonard Britton, superintendent of the Los Angeles Unified School District, explains:

> *The dropout problem must be addressed cooperatively by the schools, parents, policymakers, social agencies, and the corporate community. Together, we can design and implement programs, determine their effectiveness, and aggressively support the strategies that really work.*

The Urban Superintendents Network invites all those with a stake in the future of our young people to join hands in this effort.

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Part 2.

Six Strategies

Best Bets

From their many years of experience in educating at-risk students, members of the Urban Superintendents Network have learned an important lesson: No single, magical formula exists to hold potential dropouts in school or lure those who leave back to the classroom. Different communities, schools, and students have varying needs; what works for a bored but gifted youngster from the Bronx may be inappropriate for a chronically truant adolescent from Portland, Oregon.

Students leave school for many reasons and under different conditions. Therefore, programs to hold them there must be imaginative, comprehensive, and tailored to meet individual differences. The best prevention plans serve youngsters from preschool through high school and address the many factors that cause students to drop out.

The superintendents recognize that serious gaps exist in what we know about lowering the dropout rate and that conclusive data documenting significant program success is rare. But at the same time, they acknowledge the impracticality of resisting initiatives because they are "unproven." Given the scope of the dropout problem, it is not feasible to wait until the last bit of empirical evidence has been collected before launching preventive programs.

The following six strategies are the urban public school superintendents' "best bets" to keep students in school. The superintendents have furnished descriptions of programs to illustrate each strategy. Some of the strategies are geared specifically to at-risk students. Others affect the quality of education for all youngsters. In the drive to reduce the dropout rate, members of the Urban Superintendents Network believe that neither approach can be ignored.

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1. Intervene Early

Some children have mastered their ABC's and recited nursery rhymes long before they enter kindergarten. Others—most often those from economically disadvantaged homes—are not prepared for school. These children may not use standard English comfortably and may not express themselves well. Their social, cognitive, or motor skill development may not match the expected behaviors of entering kindergartners. They may even have health problems that interfere. Such difficulties are of great concern to the urban school superintendents. They recognize that without special help early in their development, underprivileged youngsters may never compete on equal terms with privileged ones. Research shows that students who drop out display academic problems as early as the third grade. The superintendents also recognize that the earlier they intervene—preferably in the preschool years and with the involvement of parents—the greater the dividends. The recent report from the Committee on Economic Development urges, among other things, preschool programs for all disadvantaged 3- and 4-year-olds and calls for "the earliest possible intervention with at-risk families for reasons of both compassion and cost effectiveness."

Because a large percent of those who drop out do so in high school, a tendency exists to view the dropout problem as falling solely within the high schools' domain. This attitude is changing, however, as educators develop more sophisticated ways to identify behavioral, attitudinal, and cognitive problems—not just in junior high or grade school, but even before a child starts formal schooling. Thus Albuquerque Superintendent Lillian Barna notes:

> *Intervention programs during the formative years can well be the key to [dropout] prevention. Building self-confidence and parent support are more attainable goals during the preschool years.*

The urban public school superintendents believe that early intervention makes great sense in light of current knowledge about the cumulative process that leads to dropping out. The downward spiral often begins with early family experiences. Children who grow up in stressful, indifferent, or hostile environments are more apt to become insecure, anxious about learning, and distrustful of adults. Children from healthy home environments enter school with their natural curiosity, their interest in learning, and their sense of well-being intact. An at-risk youth's background can be the precursor of school experiences that add to his alienation and poor self-image. Without self-confidence, these children will never become avid learners or fulfill their potential. Special attention from educators or a nonschool source may be needed to make this happen.

Preschool and Early Childhood Programs

Preschool and early childhood programs head the urban superintendents' list of ways to help at-risk youngsters succeed. Evaluations of top-quality preschool programs suggest that early intervention can have long-term effects on disadvantaged children by

decreasing their need for special programs and lowering delinquency, pregnancy, and dropout rates (Berrueta-Clement, Barnett, Epstein, Schweinhart, & Weikart). These programs are also thought to improve the academic and social behavior of their enrollees when they reach high school.

Many districts have already instituted successful prekindergarten and all-day kindergarten programs. However, some superintendents are still struggling to determine what tests, curricula, and staff training are needed to assure that the preschool programs are not merely scaled-down versions of kindergarten or the first grade.

■ Chicago launched an all-day program in 1982 to address the educational readiness deprivation of children entering kindergarten. In six schools—all with large black, Hispanic, and poverty-student enrollments—5 hours of instruction is provided each day to almost 600 kindergartners. Teachers help these youngsters develop skills most often linked to later school success: math, reading, and social skills.

School officials place great emphasis on involving parents by providing them with workshops in child development, health education, and using community resources. Parents are encouraged to go on school-arranged field trips because many have never been out of their communities. Parents are also taught ways to help their children at home. For example, parents can select and read books to their children. Those parents lacking a high school diploma are encouraged to enroll in a GED program.

How well does the program work? Standardized test scores of the 600 participants improved from 6 to 8 months in most areas during 6 months of instruction. Students whose parents were involved in their schooling improved the most. The youngsters' social skills showed similar gains. Both student and teacher attendance in the schools with all-day programs have consistently been above city-wide averages. Velma Thomas, director of Chicago's Bureau of Early Childhood Programs, says of this program, "It's the way to go. It's better to intervene early than to remediate later."

■ Newark is pleased with its pilot all-day kindergarten program, which began in 1985 in 11 elementary schools. Most participants are older than the average kindergartner, have previously been in prekindergarten programs, and have been deemed "readier" to cope with an all-day setting. A district evaluation found that even when school officials controlled for age and readiness, children in the all-day program did better. At the end of the school year they had progressed further in reading, had mastered more sophisticated cognitive skills, and had better attendance. Similarly, at the end of the first grade, students who had been in the all-day kindergarten program scored significantly higher on standardized achievement tests than those from the half-day program. One teacher felt some children were too immature to handle an all-day program, and it is premature to know whether the program will help lower the dropout rate. Nevertheless, the district has expanded the program into three more schools, and wants to provide all-day programs in still more schools when money becomes available.

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■ **Buffalo enrolls children, many of whom are economically disadvantaged, from 3 years, 9 months to 4 years, 9 months of age in half-day and full-day prekindergarten programs. During the 1986–87 school year, 2,019 children received help through these programs to develop their cognitive, affective, and physical skills. Classes are small, and most have both a teacher and a teacher's aide so that participants receive much personal attention.**

Joan Downey, director of Buffalo's Department of Early Childhood Education, believes it is crucial for parents to become involved in their children's education early. For that reason, parents are encouraged to observe in classrooms, to participate in workshops (on topics like how to read to children at home), and to attend field trips (such as one to an art gallery to see their child's art work on display). At a final conference, teachers talk with parents about their children's growth during the school year and present them with activity books to use with their sons and daughters during the summer. A study of 1,000 program participants found that their verbal and quantitative skills improved significantly.

Monitoring Students' Progress

Monitoring the academic and social progress of children carefully is the best way to make sure students receive suitable special services throughout their years in school. It enables educators to determine which students need help, what type of help they need, and how they are progressing. Arthur Jefferson, general superintendent of the Detroit Public Schools, explains:

> *I often call for the records of students or former students who have been in serious trouble so that I can review their complete profile. This helps me to determine if the school district could have done anything to counsel or guide them in a more positive direction.*

Fortunately, it is easier to monitor students today than it once was because computers are available to store and retrieve information rapidly. Furthermore, better tests are available (some nationally and some locally developed) to gauge a child's readiness for school and to track his or her progress.

■ **Minneapolis administers "criterion-referenced benchmark tests" each year to students in kindergarten through the ninth grade. These locally developed tests help Minneapolis educators to track students' academic progress and to judge whether they have mastered the knowledge required to proceed to the next grade. Superintendent Richard Green initiated the testing program to end the district's long-standing practice, found in districts nationwide, of "socially promoting" students who were far behind grade level.**

At five transitional points—kindergarten and grades 2, 5, 7, and 9—students who do not pass the tests generally cannot move on to the next grade. (A few handi-

capped students are exempt.) About 13 percent of students at each of the five levels are not promoted. Very few are retained at more than one level, and no child is allowed to repeat a grade more than once at each promotional gate. A key to the program is that those retained are taught the material in a new way or in a different setting. For example, students who fail kindergarten repeat the regular half-day kindergarten program and receive an additional half day of instruction to boost their math, language, and social skills. In these special transitional classes, students learn phonics and complete "hands on" math exercises.

Instruction is provided in small groups, and teachers make a special effort to praise the students. "Lots of them come from homes where education isn't a high priority, and they hate school," Lead Kindergarten Intervention Teacher Donna McClellan said. The disadvantaged children also go on special field trips—to the zoo, for example—because, said McClellan, "These kids have problems if we're talking in class about a rabbit or an elephant and they've never seen a rabbit or an elephant." Thus far, 97 percent of the students who failed kindergarten passed the benchmark test at the end of the transitional program.

While monitoring should begin early, to affect the dropout rate it must continue throughout a youngster's years in school.

■ **The Dade County, Florida, public schools use computers to keep elaborate tabs on the district's approximately 100,000 7th through 12th graders. School officials enter a wide range of information into computers, some of which enables them to identify students at risk of dropping out. For instance, students' grades and standardized test scores are tracked. So are student conferences with teachers or counselors to discuss academic or behavioral problems, tardinesses, legal problems (robberies or assaults, for example), and attendance information—both overall and by class. "In the past, we would have recorded all of this information somewhere," explained Ray Turner, assistant superintendent for Educational Accountability. "But it was never all in one place, so it was hard for us to get a comprehensive picture of a student." With the new system, which began 2 years ago, students can be tracked as they move from school to school. Only administrators and counselors in a student's current school have access to records. Attorneys reviewed the information system to make certain it was legally sound.**

As excellent as technology has become in districts like Dade County, superintendents caution that it will never eliminate the need for staff diligence. No computerized tracking system works unless someone decides what information it must contain, enters accurate data, and uses it. The superintendents also stress the need to build assurances of confidentiality into any computer monitoring system.

Monitoring a child's progress and intervening early are the first steps to reducing the dropout rate. But Albuquerque Superintendent Lillian Barna concludes, "The challenge then remains for the elementary and secondary schools to sustain those gains." Creating a good school climate is one of the best ways to make certain that happens.

2. Create a Positive School Climate

A wealth of "effective schools" research in recent years shows that schools with these assets stand the best chance of providing a climate in which students can learn:

- Strong, committed leaders;
- Autonomy to make decisions;
- A stable staff receiving support and sufficient ongoing training;
- Good student-teacher relationships;
- Orderly classrooms; and
- A challenging and appropriate curriculum.

Other characteristics are also important: consistent discipline (discussed in the discipline standards section), a sense of community, school-wide goals, involved parents, a supportive environment, high expectations, shared decision making, joint planning, school-wide recognition of academic success, and sufficient time for students to learn. Together these contribute to better learning environments, higher achievement, decreased truancy, fewer behavior problems, and a lower dropout rate.

Hiring Effective Principals

How can educators create effective schools? First, they must hire effective principals, then give them the flexibility, autonomy, and resources they need to do their job.[2] No one in the school is better able to generate staff optimism, which in turn helps students acquire sound skills and habits.

Strong principals can create a vision for their schools and empower their staffs to move toward it in collaboration with the community. They can ensure that human and material resources are properly managed and coordinated. They can provide teachers with the time needed to instruct and motivate their students. They can help teachers to develop a challenging and appropriate curriculum. With the administration's approval, principals can select their own staff members to assure that each possesses qualities suitable for their school. They can set high expectations. Finally, principals can encourage their staffs to believe that all students, including at-risk ones, are educable.

■ **Atlanta's George Washington Carver High School provides a sterling example of a school whose principal has positively affected school climate. Several years ago, Superintendent Alonzo Crim was prepared to close Carver, which provided a constant reminder of the deterioration, chaos, and relentless poverty plaguing**

[2]The *Principal Selection Guide*, published in June 1987 by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement, describes what educators know about effective principals, good selection processes, and reliable methods of assessment.

many inner-city high schools. Its dropout rate was more than 50 percent, and suspensions were high. When the community voiced strong objections to closing Carver, Crim brought in Norris Hogans, principal of a nearby elementary school, to turn Carver around.

Carver serves a large number of disadvantaged youngsters; the median annual family income of its students is $4,500. Nevertheless, Hogans, a powerful, charismatic personality, believed Carver students could achieve. First, he tightened up discipline. Hogans insists on orderly hallways. No radios are allowed, and fighting is not tolerated. Second, he instituted a dress code. Boys cannot wear earrings, caps, or Afro combs. Girls cannot wear rollers. Third, he pressured teachers, many of whom had been on the staff for many years and had grown lethargic, to clean up their act. He made it clear that he expected them to be top-notch teachers. He also stressed the need for them to expect a lot from their students. This helped improve student achievement at Carver. And it created an atmosphere in which both teachers and students are happier.

"Learning is what people are here for," Hogans says. "Everyone's a learner—I'm a learner, teachers are learners, the students are learners... Before, teachers were begging to leave the school. Now, they are begging to come." Student attendance, at 95 percent, is now among the best of any Atlanta high school. Suspensions are few and far between. The completion rate? Between 85 and 90 percent of students entering Carver in the ninth grade now graduate 4 years later.

Encouragement and Training

School officials recognize that principals don't become excellent without encouragement and training. Therefore, many districts have devised ways to help assure that they receive both.

■ The District of Columbia Public Schools opened a Principal Center, which provides everything from workshops to lectures to administrative training.

Principals, assistant principals, and aspiring principals can improve their managerial and instructional leadership skills at the Principals' Academy, which is part of the center. Glynnis Powell found the academy a blessing when she became an assistant principal in midyear. "The semester course helped me get focused," she said. "It gave me a chance to meet others who worked in the same type of school." She also appreciated meeting and sharing ideas with colleagues, learning how to keep good records, and learning how to develop, run, and maintain a good school. "Principals are learners and are ever growing," she said. "Everyone in education should be willing to learn."

The center also selects some principals to receive training at summer institutes. Principal Ann Thomas attended Vanderbilt University, where she gained knowledge to turn her school around. How did she accomplish this?

- She made expectations clear through her actions and weekly bulletins.

- **She led an orientation with students to inform them of the expectations and rules.**
- **She helped teachers and students develop their self-esteem.**
- **She encouraged teachers to become more involved in professional activities and asked them to attend staff development seminars.**
- **She began requiring students to eat lunch at school, which decreased the number who left around noon and failed to return.**
- **She did away with double blocks of free time for teachers, which helped to assure that they would remain in school.**
- **She reduced the number of students roaming around outside the school by monitoring the school grounds and asking the community and businesses to do likewise.**
- **She insisted that better records be kept, which improved attendance.**
- **She gave teachers more instructional support and personal attention.**

Personal Attention

Principals can also help assure that at-risk students receive adequate personal attention. Students who drop out invariably complain that they left because they felt that the principal and teachers weren't interested in them. Principals in many of the best schools know the name of every student, and teachers go out of their way to make all students feel welcome and to serve as mentors.

■ **The Los Angeles Unified School District began an "Adopt-a-Student Program" at Fremont High School, whose 60 percent attrition rate was among the highest in the district. Fremont school officials identified 125 at-risk students, who were "adopted" by two or more teachers, counselors, or other staff members. The program is designed "to give students someone they can talk to, who will follow up on their problems, and who can let them know someone cares," said Fremont Dropout Coordinator Juanita Lewis. The adults call students when they are absent, help them with homework assignments, encourage them, talk with their parents, and reward students with weekend outings to the movies or by taking them on picnics.**

Students praise the program: "They care what I do and that really helps me out. Before I would ditch a lot, but now I realize how good school is," said Maria, a 10th grader. "You don't realize the importance of education until someone talks to you about it. They make you feel you are needed. I realized I do have a good mind and can learn if I want to," said Anna, another 10th grader. Of the 125 students who were "adopted" last year, only 4 dropped out.

■ **"You can choose to be involved and work with kids, or you can choose to lock yourself in your office and work with papers. I choose to work with kids," said Lynda Lewis, former principal of Jefferson Davis Junior High School and of San-**

dalwood Junior-Senior High School in Duval County, Florida. Lewis instituted a Teacher-Advisor Program (TAP) at both schools. Students with academic or behavior problems are "tapped" into the program, where each is assigned a special teacher-advisor. Each teacher oversees no more than six advisees and is in contact with each student an average of nine times per quarter.

Advisors also contact the student's family an average of twice per quarter. The teacher encourages parents to participate in school activities, discusses academic progress with parents, and counsels the students on personal and academic problems. Whether the contact is for 2 or 30 minutes, the at-risk youngsters appreciate the personal attention.

At Sandalwood, which has about 3,300 students, TAP helped reduce the dropout rate from 5 percent in 1981–82 to less than 1 percent in 1982–83. Jefferson Davis' dropout rate dropped from 17 percent to 0 in 3 years.

Small Classes

Many superintendents, teachers, parents, and school board members believe classes must be small for at-risk students to receive personal attention. Research on the impact of class size on student achievement is mixed. However, many educators believe that students learn more in small classes, providing the teacher takes advantage of the opportunities that small classes offer. Common sense suggests that small classes may make a difference for some students with special needs because they increase the time and attention a teacher has to give each student. Small classes also increase the time a teacher has to plan the curriculum and decrease record keeping. But for small classes to benefit students, teachers must change their instructional practices in several ways. They must

- Build a more personal relationship with students;
- Increase the time each student has to participate in class discussions;
- Individualize instruction;
- Allow time to ask questions that require students to think and analyze;
- Provide students with immediate feedback and allow them to be more actively engaged in learning;
- Use diverse teaching styles;
- Tailor teaching strategies for non-English speaking students; and
- Allow time to counsel students, motivate them, and be attuned to their academic and social problems, as well as their cultural backgrounds.

Some districts have decreased class sizes in the early elementary grades as part of their early intervention strategy.

■ **The collective bargaining agreement in Hartford now stipulates that no kindergarten through second grade class may contain more than 22 students. In 1985, the maximum allowed in these grades was 28.**

■ **Denver school officials reduced the average first and second grade classes from 28 to 21 students.**

■ **In Dallas, test scores of some fourth through sixth grade students improved substantially when they were placed in classes with an average enrollment of 18. These students previously had been in classes with an average enrollment of 25.**

Small classes have also aided secondary school students.

■ **The average class in Denver's alternative school program contains 15 students, allowing each student to receive more personal attention.**

Counseling and Mentors

Counseling can provide at-risk students with individual attention. These students often need more support than a regular school counselor has the time to provide. Therefore all of the staff must share counseling responsibilities—not only the regular counselors, but social workers, attendance clerks, assistant principals, secretaries, custodians, and especially teachers.

To provide potential dropouts with the necessary support, many districts have expanded their counseling services. For instance, some now place counselors in elementary schools, counsel the entire families of potential dropouts, and link at-risk students with mentors in business and industry.

■ **Six years ago, millionaire industrialist Eugene Lang guaranteed 61 East Harlem sixth graders a college education if they completed high school and qualified for admission. Lang hired a full-time counselor to help students with school and personal problems. He also nurtured his charges with tutors, trips to colleges, an open door to his office, and, above all, his energetic encouragement. By December 1987, 48 of the 51 who stayed in Harlem after Lang's offer are expected to have graduated. Twenty-five of those have been accepted to colleges as diverse as Swarthmore in Pennsylvania, Barnard in Manhattan, and LaGuardia Community College in Queens. That's not bad in a school system where some statistics show that half of all students fail to graduate.**

"Mr. Lang gave me a sense of someone being there for you," said Aristedes Alvarado, who is bound for Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, New York. "You don't get that at school. When I told him I wasn't sure I would make it in such a prestigious school as Rensselaer, he said, 'Aristedes, you're a dreamer, dreamers can do anything.' "

Other philanthropists are engaged in similar activities.

■ **Banker Harrison I. Steans has agreed to pay 37 sixth graders at Chicago's Schneider Elementary School at least $1,200 for each of their 4 years in college or trade school. However, they must maintain high academic standards to receive the money. Right now, only about 40 percent of Schneider graduates complete high school, and fewer than 5 percent ever set foot in college.**

Other districts assign fewer students to counselors of at-risk students so that each youngster receives more attention, and many districts make a special effort to select counselors for at-risk students who have shown they work particularly well with them.

Peer counseling and peer support groups work well in some districts.

■ **"No one . . . can help a student better than another student," says Mary Vereen, supervisor in the Dade County Public Schools' Department of Dropout Prevention. The Florida district launched Project SWITCHED (Students Working Intelligently to Combat High Educational Deficiencies) in 14 secondary schools with low attendance rates. A teacher advisor in each school receives a stipend to coordinate project activities, and district staff train 8 to 10 peer counselors from each school in counseling techniques. Each counselor helps 10 peers each year with homework, working with them during lunch and before and after school, calling their homes if they are absent, and talking with their parents. One local resident rewarded 100 of the peer counselors and at-risk students who improved in school with a vacation weekend at his Florida resort.**

■ **Seventh graders entering Northeast Junior High School in Kansas City who have been absent 30 percent of the time participate in weekly student support groups. Here they share their experiences with each other and with community and school staff. They are also recognized for perfect attendance during the previous week and for outstanding personal or academic accomplishments. Last year students whose attendance improved received coupons from Pizza Hut. Those who improve their attendance "adopt" others needing encouragement. The results? Participants improve their attendance an average of 34 percent. Local businesses provided grand prizes last year to students whose attendance had improved the most—a $330 spending spree at Sears, a stereo, and a choice of a dirt bike or a 10-speed bicycle.**

Joint Planning and Shared Decision Making

Schools often benefit when everyone interested in them works together to plan and make decisions.

■ **Detroit created a School Improvement Team in each school because district officials believe (and research confirms) that change initiated from within a school is more effective than change imposed from outside. In each building, supervisors, staff, students, and parents work together to do everything from setting goals**

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to evaluating improvements. Detroit educators believe effective local school planning must be accompanied by adequate human and financial support from the central office and the community.

■ Newark created in its schools planning teams comprising parents, teachers, and administrators. Each team suggests improvements based on responses from teacher surveys and the results of "effective schools" research. Team members credit part of their success to 3 days of training they receive on how to solve school problems.

A report by the Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy underscores the vital importance of involving teachers in decisions that affect them. A rich source of creative innovation and cumulative knowledge is lost when teachers are excluded, the report concludes. Over time, failing to involve teachers demoralizes them, increases their alienation, and saps their energy, which could be productively used to bring about change.

■ New York's Dropout Prevention Program calls for planning teams in 10 high schools. Each is made up of 10 to 15 volunteer teachers, paraprofessionals, aides, administrators, and a dropout prevention coordinator. Together with the principal they plan, carry out, budget, and evaluate dropout prevention strategies tailored for their schools. Team members complete much of the planning at a month-long summer institute, but they continue to meet during the regular school year. New York school officials believe the teams provide teachers with a special opportunity to put their theories of change into practice.

■ Buffalo's District Remediation Plan, begun in 1986, requires each school to locate and serve at-risk students. Principals must use standardized or city tests or teacher evaluations to identify at-risk students by the 10th week of the school year. The school staff must then notify each parent whose child is at-risk and select an appropriate remedial program for the child. Records of each at-risk student are updated regularly to help assure that each receives help. Principals must submit plans for every student to the district's central office for review and approval.

Occasionally, the best efforts to improve the school climate fail. As a last resort, some districts have closed schools that simply don't work and transferred the students to neighboring facilities.

■ The Portland School Board closed three high schools that, as the district's enrollment declined, became too small to provide the necessary variety of courses and services. Two of these schools had the highest dropout rates in the city; in one of the two schools, more than 20 percent of the students dropped out each year, and 50 percent of those entering ninth grade failed to graduate 4 years later. Furthermore, enrollments in the two schools were dropping far more rapidly than in other district high schools.

After the three schools closed, the Portland School Board moved their students to ones nearby. Youngsters at the high school with the highest dropout rate ended

up in two high schools with dropout rates closer to the district's annual average of 7 percent. The result? Students from the closed high school began dropping out at the lower, new-school rate. Furthermore, their attendance improved, and their standardized test scores and grades rose.

3. Set High Expectations

Many of today's education reformers have called for higher attendance, academic, and behavioral standards. Critics claim that this may drive borderline students out of school. But the urban superintendents believe that students from whom much is expected can learn more—providing they receive the support they need to meet the standards. If educators consistently communicate that students must attend class regularly, behave once they get there, and strive toward excellence, they will be more likely to do so. District of Columbia Superintendent Floretta Dukes McKenzie recognizes the importance of high expectations when she observes:

> *To do well in school, students must think well of themselves. High expectations from others (particularly teachers and parents) are decisive in developing the self-esteem . . . that leads to academic success. Success in school is the ultimate answer to the dropout problem.*

Attendance Standards

Attendance standards are a major concern to urban school districts because a child who is not in class clearly cannot develop the skills required for school success. When a student regularly cuts one class or fails to show up for the entire day, this should alert educators that the student might not view the school as a friendly place to learn and socialize. When a school's overall attendance rate is low, this may signal that some of its practices and policies do not respond to the students' needs. Duval County, Florida, Superintendent Herb A. Sang observes:

> *The human spirit responds to challenge, and young people generally rise to the level expected of them. When Duval implemented a strict student attendance policy, student absenteeism decreased. When we enacted rigorous promotional policies, student achievement improved. Some people anticipated that higher standards would lead to a higher dropout rate. But this hasn't happened.*

Students who drop out nearly always have attendance problems beginning in elementary school, which is why policies to monitor and improve attendance are central to many urban schools' dropout prevention plans. Nationally, about 94 percent of all students attend class on any single day, but in some inner-city schools the attendance rates are far lower.

The superintendents have found several policies and practices that can contribute to poor attendance. Failure to inform parents heads the list. Parents need to be told when their children are absent so parents can urge them to attend. Second, some educators fail to acknowledge a student's return to school after a prolonged absence. Many truant students do not want to give up on school, but returning youngsters often find that no one helps them to reenter. Third, many districts have inappropriate suspen-

sion policies for truant or tardy students. These policies often fail to improve attendance because they do not address the reasons students are absent. Tardiness is often a symptom of school alienation, and turning late students away can feed their alienation. Some districts also refer truant students to court in hopes of "scaring" them back to school. This is not apt to work unless these students receive the services they need to change the factors contributing to the truancy.

Many school districts have established attendance practices and policies designed to keep students in school. For example, some districts have limited the number of absences allowed since students tend to take the maximum number.

■ **For 8 years, the Duval County Public Schools in Jacksonville, Florida, did not allow students with more than nine absences every 45 days to receive the passing grades they had earned. Because so many students took the maximum number of absences, in 1986–87 the school board lowered the number allowed to seven. Since lowering the number, the dropout rate has not increased, and the district's standardized test scores have improved. Duval educators note that students missing more than 7 days can appeal their case to a committee for review.**

■ **In October 1986, Cleveland assigned a Management Outreach Team of central office and school administrators to each comprehensive, magnet, and vocational high school. These teams made or tried to make home visits to all of the district's 2,989 truant students. More than one-fifth (22 percent) returned to school, where they received extra support services. Three percent of the 644 returnees graduated in June 1987, and an additional 51 percent of them were promoted to the next grade.**

Electronic home telephone calling programs have helped reach out to families of truant and chronically tardy children without great expense to the school. This approach lets the family and students know that the school values good attendance. Evidence suggests these programs lead to modest attendance improvements.

■ **San Francisco boosted student attendance in three high schools with an electronic home phone program by 3 percent in 1 year. Counselors personally call parents after a youngster is out for 5 consecutive days.**

Other districts are trying more aggressive approaches to improve attendance.

■ **In Buffalo, the board of education and the Erie County Community Action Organization developed the Attendance Intervention Model (AIM). AIM teams, made up of either a police officer paired with an attendance teacher or a police officer paired with a social worker, pick up truants at community sites where young people gather. Truants are then brought to school or to an AIM center, where they are interviewed and their parents are telephoned. The district also develops a plan to improve each truant's attendance. AIM has helped the district to boost its attendance by 2.3 percent between 1983 and 1986.**

Academic Standards

Following reform recommendations of the last few years, many school districts have raised academic performance standards. Critics contend that requiring students to complete more academic subjects and vigorously testing students to make certain subjects are mastered will drive at-risk students out of school. However, the superintendents favor keeping high standards—as long as low-achieving students are given the academic support they need to meet the standards.

Unfortunately, not many States have provided more money for students requiring additional help to meet the standards. Nevertheless, some districts have achieved success with several strategies. These include

- Longer school days and school years;
- Evening, after-school, and weekend classes;
- Summer school;
- Tutoring;
- Transitional programs;
- Remedial teachers; and
- Incentive and motivational programs.

All of these help at-risk students improve academically. They also provide an alternative to grade retention, a practice most districts use for students who have not developed enough academically or socially to succeed in the next grade.

Although holding students back a grade may not cause them to drop out, the superintendents have found that a large proportion of those who drop out have been retained at some point during their school years.

■ A recent analysis in Cincinnati found that 40 to 50 percent of those who were retained once later dropped out, and that 60 to 70 percent of those retained twice dropped out. Those retained three or more times rarely graduated. A Chicago Public Schools analysis reached similar conclusions.

■ Another Chicago study suggests that two factors can predict a high school's dropout rate: the number of overage students it enrolls and the number of entering freshmen reading below grade level. The study recommends that educators designing dropout prevention programs pay special attention to these two findings because both are within their power to change.

Retention by itself generally does not help at-risk students to make significant academic strides. However, the practice can be beneficial if students who repeat a grade are taught the material they previously failed to master in a new way. Unfortunately, this often does not occur, which fuels a youngster's low self-esteem and causes his or

her motivation to wane. If students must be retained, it usually is best to do so early in their education to minimize the social stigma.

Longer school days and school years are high on the superintendents' list of alternatives to retention. Research, documenting logic, consistently shows that students who spend more time on academic activities learn more. Some superintendents worry that longer school days and school years will push out at-risk students who already feel alienated from school. But most believe that needy students can gain from the extra time.

■ **Duval County, Florida, added 30 minutes to the school day 3 years ago. Defying predictions, the dropout rate has not increased, and district test scores have improved.**

It is hard, if not impossible, for many youngsters who fail subjects to make them up during the regular school day. A job or a pregnancy can make this difficult. To provide some youngsters with more opportunities to earn a diploma, some districts provide **evening, after-school, or weekend classes.**

■ **Roosevelt High School in the Bronx has developed a PM School with classes from 3 to 5 p.m. 3 days a week. Many of its 200 enrollees have responsibilities that interfere with their schooling. The PM School offers 20 academic subjects and has 320 youngsters registered in clubs and other recreational activities.**

■ **Buffalo provides evening classes at Bennett High School that are virtually identical to those offered during the regular school day. In fact, Bennett's academic program is so similar that the district considers its enrollees transfer students, not dropouts. Most of the 100 students who graduate each year from Bennett would drop out if the school did not exist.**

■ **Milwaukee provides semester-long evening classes in English, mathematics, science, and social studies so that students can make up credits.**

■ **New Orleans pays teachers and tutors to work after school and on Saturdays with at-risk students needing help in language and mathematics.**

Summer school has many benefits. It can provide students with extra hours to master their coursework, and it can help them retain some of what they would normally forget during the summer vacation. In California, the high school dropout rate increased between 1978 and 1979 when summer school offerings were drastically cut. Remedial summer programs can save the district money by reducing the number of students who must repeat a grade. They can also provide language instruction for students who speak little or no English.

■ **Atlanta's 20-year-old comprehensive summer school program includes Project ALERT (Atlantans Learning Employment Responsibilities Together), which serves disadvantaged 9th and 10th graders. Since the program began in 1980, more than 1,300 students have received 18 hours of instruction each week in basic skills and have worked another 16 to 18 hours at paid jobs. "The program**

allows students to improve their academic performance and helps them to understand the impact that succeeding in school has on their careers," explained Barbara Whitaker, assistant superintendent for Planning and Expanded Services. An evaluation found that ALERT students improved their communications skills considerably and their computation skills a little. Their attendance and classroom performance the following school year also improved.

■ Summer school has long been a major part of Buffalo's campaign to reduce the dropout rate. Project SMART (Summer Math and Reading Tasks) helps students improve their basic skills without ever leaving home. Youngsters from grades 3 through 6 who scored in the lowest 23 percent on standardized tests receive reading and mathematics activity booklets on the last day of school, along with instructions on when and where to mail weekly assignments. Teachers provide constructive comments, grade the lessons, and return them by mail. Dial-a-Teacher provides extra assistance. Evaluations show that this program helps students maintain and in many cases improve their skills. Buffalo also provides remedial summer school classes in language arts and arithmetic for elementary school students, and review classes for students in grades 7 through 12 who have failed classes during the regular school year.

Tutoring has helped some students meet academic expectations. Districts recruit tutors from many settings. Some are public or private elementary or secondary school teachers. Others are high school or college students or volunteers from a range of organizations. For instance, in Buffalo honor students tutor fellow secondary students at home.

■ Bushwick High School in Brooklyn, New York, has devised short-term tutoring programs to encourage students to stay in school. Teachers provide one-on-one instruction to long-term absentees, and 16 graduate students from New York University tutor 60 Bushwick students needing special academic attention.

■ Hartford assigns volunteer tutors and advisors to at-risk students in three high schools and two middle schools. The tutors and advisors are district teachers, whose contract requires them to provide 20 hours of volunteer service during each school year. (However, they need not contribute their time to this particular program.) Tutors and advisees meet regularly. The district is evaluating the program.

Programs to ease the transition into high school provide support for potential dropouts, who often have a hard time adjusting to high school. Ninth and tenth grade students are at a critical stage of adolescence. Just as they are struggling to come to terms with physical and emotional changes, they are entering new schools that may seem large and impersonal. Moreover, they are required to take many new courses, and no one teacher is responsible for their instruction.

In a sample of New York City students, at least half of those who went on to drop out had poor attendance and had failed all or nearly all of their courses in the first term

of 9th grade. Similarly, approximately 25 percent of Newark's 9th graders failed most or all of their courses.

Some school districts have transitional programs that modify students' schedules, lessening the need for them to move from class to class.

■ **The New York City Board of Education's "block programming" keeps at-risk students together for two or three periods each day. Project SOAR (Student Opportunity, Advancement, and Retention) has served about 2,330 9th and 10th grade students in 16 high schools since it began in the 1985–86 school year. All of them were absent at least 20 days in the previous semester or 40 days during the previous school year and passed too few classes to be promoted to the next grade.**

Participants receive vision, hearing, and dental care, as well as intensive group and individual counseling. A team of school officials makes home visits and telephones homes regularly. Teachers hold conferences with parents and ask them to attend various school functions and to participate in workshops with their children. Classes are small. To supplement school experiences, the students attend cultural and recreational activities away from school.

How well does SOAR work? About half of the students who enrolled for most of the year improved their attendance and passed at least one more course than they passed the previous year. The students who did not enroll until the spring were unable to improve attendance or academic achievement as much.

Other transitional tactics? Pittsburgh provides all 9th graders with 2½ days of orientation to help smooth the transition from middle to high school. In addition to assigning peer counselors to incoming freshmen, one Denver high school has created an "anchor class" for all 9th graders, who meet together for one class and for lunch each day. Assigning the most experienced teachers to the 9th (or the 10th) grade may help at-risk students entering high school. Providing special training to 9th grade teachers so they can "tune in" to their 9th grade students, and rearranging the sequence of the 9th grade to 12th grade curriculum in ways that are more appropriate for these students can also help. Other districts have had success with transitional programs for elementary school students.

■ **Hartford's Project Bridge allows at-risk 7th graders who should be in the 9th grade to complete 3 years of work in 2 years. Before entering the program, each participant and his or her parent or guardian must sign a contract indicating they intend to meet the goals of the program. For example, students must agree to attend school each day, and their parents or guardians must help them get to school on time.**

Bridge participants are grouped in small classes for reading, math, language arts, social studies, and science, where they receive individualized instruction and remedial help. Students' regular academic coursework is supplemented with preemployment or life-skills workshops. At the end of the spring semester, Bridge participants who have met program objectives are promoted to the 9th grade.

Those who haven't enter the 8th grade, where they are given a chance to qualify for accelerated promotion at the end of the first marking period.

Bridge students entering high school are closely monitored and are offered special services. Of the 25 students who began Project Bridge as 7th graders in the 1985–86 school year, 68 percent have been promoted to the 10th grade for 1987–88. Twelve percent have moved out of town, 16 percent are repeating 9th grade, and 4 percent dropped out. Project Bridge now exists in all Hartford middle schools, thanks to a joint effort of the city's schools and businesses, which provided the money.

■ Fourth and seventh grade students in New York City who have not met mandated standards enter the Promotional Gates Program. Those who complete this program but still aren't prepared for the next grade enter the Gates Extension Program for further remedial help. Both programs stress two principles, that peers should remain together in remedial classes and that material should be taught differently each time a student repeats it.

■ New Orleans recently set up transitional classes in four schools for elementary school students with low test scores and poor attendance. During the 1987–88 school year, one class in each school will serve students who have completed kindergarten but are not ready for the first grade. The 15-to-1 pupil-teacher ratio in these classes is intended to help pull the students up to their instructional grade level.

In some districts, **remedial teachers** provide academic help to at-risk students.

■ Minneapolis provides remedial teachers for students who scored poorly on district-developed tests or whose teachers or counselors have judged them to need extra help. These teachers are in addition to the district's regular classroom, Chapter 1, and special education teachers. The remedial teachers teach reading, mathematics, and writing in small groups outside the regular classrooms. Since the district began using remedial teachers, the percentage of students who have passed the "benchmark" tests required for promotion to the next grade has improved. Test scores of blacks and American Indian students have also risen, and the gap between minority and nonminority student test scores has narrowed.

Incentives and programs to boost students' motivation have encouraged some students to stay in school.

■ Cleveland's "Scholarship in Escrow" program provides scholarships and trust funds for students in grades 7 to 12 who earn good grades. At the end of each marking period, students receive $40 for each A they earn in five academic areas: English, mathematics, science, social studies, or foreign languages. They earn $20 for each B and $10 for each C. A high school student who earns all A's in each of the four marking periods may earn $800 each year toward college expenses. Foundations and private benefactors foot the bill.

■ **Houston offered tickets to Astroworld, a local theme park, to all students in schools with attendance rates of at least 96 percent for the month. The district also provided movie tickets to students with perfect attendance. These incentives were so successful in improving attendance that when budget cuts put an end to the district-wide program many principals developed their own incentive programs.**

Some districts believe academic extracurricular activities motivate students to do well in school. These include academic booster organizations, academic pep rallies, and academic games in which schools compete against each other, and science and math clubs. Some districts also provide their staffs with incentives to keep students in school.

■ **Dade County, Florida, provides schools with an incentive to reduce dropout rates. At the start of each school year, secondary schools identify 100 at-risk students with poor attendance, low grades, and frequent suspensions. Each school must then create ways to keep these students in school and must monitor their progress. At the beginning of the next academic year, schools receive $50 for each student still enrolled. Principals can use the money (up to $5,000, if all of the targeted students remain in school) any way they wish within their schools.**

Discipline Standards

High discipline standards are important to maintain in all schools, but nowhere are they more important than in schools with high dropout rates. Misconduct is among the gravest problems in many schools troubled with keeping students in school. It is also of great concern to the public, which in annual Gallup polls consistently mentions discipline as its number one problem in American education. School dropouts often recall school discipline as being ineffective and unfair.

Superintendents believe that the best discipline policies are preventive and that educators' energies should go toward eradicating problems before they become full blown. How can educators accomplish this?

First, they can establish district-wide policies that encourage good behavior. Second, they can communicate the rules to all students. Next, they can enforce the rules consistently throughout the district; a student who slugs his classmate in one school or classroom should receive the same punishment as a student who has committed the same offense in another. Finally, they can administer fair punishment. Unfair punishment appears to result in more delinquency and poor attendance.

■ **In 1981, Seattle developed a uniform district-wide discipline policy, which the district reviews and updates annually. As an outgrowth of this policy, all students and staff members receive a disciplinary procedures handbook explaining their rights and responsibilities. The district credits the policy with helping to make discipline more consistent from school to school and from classroom to classroom. However, district officials are still concerned because minority students receive**

a disproportionate number of disciplinary reprimands (as well as poor grades and assignments to special education classes). In 1985, the district established a task force charged with correcting these problems. The school board aims to eliminate the racial discrepancies by 1991.

■ **Pittsburgh established discipline committees in each school. Each committee identifies discipline problems in its building and encourages the entire staff (principals, teachers, custodians, clerks, and other professionals and support staff) to enforce the discipline code consistently.**

Some districts have trained their administrators and staffs in how to manage conflict with hopes of improving their ability to prevent discipline problems.

Many districts have tried **reducing suspensions.** Educators recognize that it may be necessary to suspend some students in order to provide others with a climate in which they can learn. However, when students are asked to leave school, they are deprived of time for instruction, which further distances them from school. Nationally, 44 percent of black dropouts, 31 percent of Hispanic dropouts, and 26 percent of white dropouts have been suspended or put on probation at least once. Far smaller proportions (19, 17, and 11 percent) of their stay-in-school peers have been suspended or put on probation (Wheelock, 1986).

Alternatives to suspension include

- Conferences with the student and his or her parents (particularly important because they improve communication with families, a critical first step to changing students' behavior);
- "Time out" or in-school suspension and truancy centers; and
- Intensive counseling.

■ **Seattle school officials urge school staffs, as part of their improvement plans, to provide alternatives to suspension. For example, they might develop in-house suspension and detention centers, behavior modification centers, or before- and after-school detention. These alternative programs cannot be "holding pens" for disruptive students. Instead, they are expected to provide students with services that address their problems. For instance, students might receive instruction in how to manage anger, how to take tests, or how to develop good study and social skills.**

■ **Memphis has a 3-to-9-week Pupil Services Suspension Alternative Program for students in grades 7 to 12 who have been absent at least 10 days or who have severe behavior problems and would otherwise be expelled. Students and parents sign a contract committing themselves to the program's goals. Then, under the supervision of the alternative program teachers, participants complete weekly assignments from their home schools. The program's pupil-teacher ratio is no more than 11 to 1. To get a fresh start, most students completing the program**

are placed in a new school, where about half are again eventually suspended. Nevertheless, school officials credit the suspension program with improving student behavior and attitudes towards school. They believe the program should continue, despite the extra burden it places on regular classroom teachers.

■ **Portland's Positive Alternatives to School Suspension Program has operated in several high schools since the 1980–81 school year. The program aims to reduce out-of-school suspensions and high truancy rates, and to provide a disruption-free environment for all students. Misbehaving students are not suspended from school. Instead, school officials remove them from regular classes, counsel them, and contact their parents. High schools with this program have generally improved their suspension rates, and even when suspensions are not reduced, school officials report that fights, assaults, and other violent misbehavior are reduced significantly.**

Indeed, it is crucial for districts concerned with reducing the dropout rate to set high attendance, academic, and behavior standards. A strong teaching force can help students meet these standards.

4. Select and Develop Strong Teachers

Principals exert a major influence on a school's entire climate and culture. But few educators are in a better position to affect the lives of students than teachers, who mold attitudes toward school and play a powerful role in what youngsters learn. All students need teachers who know their subject and the techniques required to communicate it. They also need teachers who respect and support them and who maintain high expectations. Teachers of at-risk students must be especially committed to each one. They must be able to counsel students and tailor instruction to individual and group differences. And they must encourage even the most troubled and academically disabled to succeed.

Children are naturally curious; they want to explore their environments and discover the world's many wonders and delights. The most successful teachers can enable the potential dropout's natural desire for learning to flourish.

This is why it is essential to hire only the most able and caring teachers. The urban school superintendents believe that teacher training institutions must develop top-quality programs, only admit students with strong academic credentials, and refuse to graduate students who aren't prepared for the challenges of the classroom.

Districts must also have sound hiring procedures to assure that those selected will work well with a range of students, including youngsters most apt to drop out. Schools and students may benefit when educators in each building can select staffs suited to student needs. However, the urban school superintendents recognize that contractual agreements and other legal considerations may make this difficult.

The superintendents believe that all teachers, even the best ones, need periodic professional nourishment and constant support. Therefore, they believe districts should regularly provide the entire teaching force with in-service training appropriate for teachers with varying skills, experience, and work situations. Not surprisingly, teachers may resist instruction when it is mandated for all but is appropriate for only a few. Teachers should help design the training so it is closely tied to a school's instructional program and environment.

A growing number of urban districts recognize the importance of staff training for everyone and special training for teachers of at-risk students.

■ **Minneapolis, recognizing that each school has its own characteristics and needs, uses corporate funds to provide staff development training in each school. During the 1986–87 school year, schools that submitted a written plan explaining their program received $50 per teacher. Eighty percent of the total must be used for what each school's staff development committee believes are top priorities. The principal can decide how to use the remaining amount.**

■ **Albuquerque's Employee Resource and Renewal Center is open 6 days a week and evenings to help teachers and principals improve their skills and to encourage them to share resources and ideas. The center provides teachers and principals with refresher training in classroom management, lesson planning, teaching**

techniques, and learning theory. Principals receive additional help in how to observe teachers more skillfully and make their conferences with teachers more useful. Superintendent Barna believes the teacher is the single most important element in strengthening the instructional program. An evaluation of principals and teachers completed after the 1985–86 school year suggests the center has helped teachers to fulfill this key role. A typical comment? "I was reminded of techniques that actually work when used in the classroom," one teacher said. "I also think [the center] helped rejuvenate my enthusiasm for teaching."

■ **In 1983, 2 years after the Pittsburgh Board of Education identified staff development as a top priority, the district opened the Schenley High School Teacher Center. The center provides 8-week "minisabbaticals" for all secondary school teachers. The teachers study today's adolescents and receive updated instruction in academic disciplines and clinical training in the elements of effective teaching.**

A center to "retool" elementary school teachers opened in Pittsburgh's Brookline Elementary School in 1986, and one for middle school teachers is scheduled to open in the fall of 1988. In addition to helping teachers instruct students more effectively, all three centers are also intended to promote collegiality among teachers and to encourage professional behavior and standards.

■ **Buffalo's BESTT program (Buffalo Educators Study Teaching Together) aims to improve secondary school teaching. The Buffalo Teachers Federation, the State University of New York at Buffalo, and the Buffalo Public Schools jointly developed the program. Teachers receive at least 30 hours of training that helps them to motivate students to learn and to participate more in class—factors that can prevent at-risk students from dropping out.**

It is essential that school officials hire the best teachers and provide them with opportunities to fine-tune their skills. But school officials must also allow teachers to do their best work. This is most apt to happen when teachers are treated as professionals. They must be given autonomy, in exchange for which they should be held accountable for their work. They must also be given encouragement and the resources they need. Teachers work best in pleasant and safe environments and when not overburdened by disciplinary or administrative tasks. When teachers feel unsupported, they are more likely to pass their discouragement along to their students.

When teachers work in a collegial atmosphere, their effectiveness and their attendance often improves. Teachers cannot be good role models if they are absent a lot, yet this problem is prevalent in some urban schools. Some school administrators provide bonuses to teachers with perfect attendance.

In the effort to hire and develop strong teachers, school officials must confront one troubling realization: Some teachers simply aren't cut out for their work. Every opportunity should be provided for a teacher to improve. But those who aren't able to should be replaced.

5. Provide a Broad Range of Instructional Programs

Youngsters whose families start them off on the right foot, who attend good schools, who have caring and committed teachers, and from whom much is expected are most apt to do well in school. Youngsters who lack these advantages—and even some who possess them—may need special programs in order to do well.

Some students require more time than others, or special treatment, to master their coursework. Youngsters raised in non-English speaking families may need special language instruction. Students who arrive at school hungry may need help from community agencies and the schools to see that they receive a nutritional breakfast. Emotionally bruised students may need counseling. Pregnant girls may require a helping hand to face the challenges of motherhood.

Many potential dropouts are at risk in more than one way. For instance, they may have poor grades, be chronically truant, come from disadvantaged homes, and be in trouble with the law. Therefore, many of the most effective programs attack the dropout problem on several fronts simultaneously.

Schools of Choice

Evidence suggests that students are more apt to attend school if their parents are allowed to choose the school based on the students' needs, abilities, and interests. Some youngsters learn best in a highly structured environment. Others flourish in a freer atmosphere. A promising pianist may favor a performing arts school. A teenager who likes to tinker with cars may perfer a school that provides training in auto mechanics. Matching at-risk students to the right school may be all it takes to nudge them toward graduation. In many urban districts, both magnet schools and alternative schools have created new options.

Magnet schools, which offer special programs, have been publicized for helping to voluntarily desegregate a school district while keeping black and white middle class students from fleeing to nonpublic or to suburban schools. Educators don't know for certain how well magnet schools succeed in holding at-risk students in school. However, research suggests that magnet schools have higher attendance and lower dropout rates than the district average. The dropout rate in Dallas' magnet schools is 3 percent, compared with 28 percent in the district. This could be because magnets, while generally not established to be highly selective, tend to draw more motivated students and to provide more opportunities for those with special needs. Furthermore, their staffs are usually chosen because they possess special teaching skills, and their enrollments and their classes tend to be smaller than those of other district schools. They also cost more to run. For instance, Dallas spends about $6,000 per pupil to educate students in its magnet schools—about twice the amount spent in other schools.

Despite these factors, many urban superintendents believe magnet schools provide a good way to serve some at-risk students.

Alternative schools serve students who have failed in more traditional settings by providing special instructional programs and by using approaches thought to work well with some at-risk students. Teachers and supervisors in alternative schools generally are granted more autonomy to tailor programs to the students' needs. The schools also provide extra counseling as well as special curricula often linked to a job or career. Like magnet schools, alternative schools are somewhat more expensive to operate, small in size, and provide students with plenty of personal attention.

■ **Seattle provides several alternative programs for at-risk students. The district's Indian Heritage Middle/High School serves about 140 Indian students. American Indians have the highest dropout rate of any minority group in the Nation. The Indian Heritage School offers its enrollees a firm grounding in basic skills, teaches them an awareness of their cultural and ethnic backgrounds, provides tutoring, and encourages Indian parents to help make decisions regarding their children's education. Daycare services and a teen parent program are important parts of the program because half of its graduates are parents. Seattle school officials report that 84 percent of the program's students have been out of their regular school for one or more semesters, and 90 percent would not be in school if this program did not exist.**

Because alternative schools serve a disproportionate number of at-risk minority students, superintendents contend that these schools run the risk of segregating and stigmatizing those who enroll. Although alternative schools often have low graduation rates, supporters argue that the schools are an important last resort for some students.

■ **Duval County's Competency Development Program (CDP) is a last resort for youngsters who cannot adjust to a traditional school. Students referred to CDP are failing in the standard program, may be disruptive, disinterested, and unmotivated, and have been retained at least twice in regular schools. CDP does not group students by grades, and it is designed to provide students with career training skills—for example, drafting, printing, electronics, or auto body repair. Participants earn elective credits in remedial basic skills courses that may be transferred back into the standard curriculum if they return to traditional schools. About 55 percent of the enrollees complete CDP, which qualifies them for a certificate of competency in a specific vocation in lieu of a regular diploma. CDP graduates may then study for a GED high school equivalency diploma at a local community college.**

■ **Dallas began a School-Community Guidance Center in two locations during the 1986–87 school year to serve students with behavior problems that might disrupt a regular school. Some participants have committed crimes ranging from assault, to possession of firearms, to possesion or use of drugs. Others have violated**

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the school district's code of student conduct or board policies. Students at the two centers receive individualized instruction and counseling and are helped to develop social skills. The staff maintains strong links with parents by visiting their homes, encouraging them to attend parent training sessions, and asking them to help solve their children's problems. The centers are also in close contact with community agencies whose interests mesh with theirs.

Students who progress sufficiently eventually return to their regular schools, where they are monitored closely. A recent evaluation found that 12 weeks after 203 students returned to regular schools, 77 percent were still in school. Of those still enrolled, 33 percent had improved their attendance and 37 percent were receiving better grades. Fifteen percent had dropped out, and the rest were back in the centers.

■ Milwaukee's School/Community Project serves dropouts or dropout-prone students at seven sites. Each school is small (with 25 to 75 students in grades 7 through 12), and most are in nontraditional settings, such as churches, Urban League offices, or in low-income housing projects. Enrollees learn basic skills and receive training that will help them find jobs—for example, in how to plan a career, where to look for a job, and how to fill out a job application. Students also receive special counseling and tutoring, and some take vocational courses. Attendance and graduation rates have steadily improved since the program began 5 years ago.

Programs for Non-English Speaking Students

Virtually all urban districts provide programs to accommodate the growing number of youngsters who come to school speaking little or no English. Estimates of the number of children from families with a limited proficiency in English range from 1.2 to 1.7 million. About 60 percent of these youngsters are from low-income homes.

A recent Department of Education publication, *Schools That Work: Educating Disadvantaged Children*, notes

> *Language deficiencies delay academic progress. For example, Hispanic students score far below non-Hispanic white students in reading achievement; the National Assessment of Educational Progress found that only 44 percent of Hispanic 9-year-olds had basic reading proficiency, compared with 72 percent of non-Hispanic white students.*
>
> *Students who have limited English proficiency are much more likely to drop out of school. Dropout rates of language-minority students such as Hispanics and Indians are among the highest in American society. Forty-five percent of Mexican-American and Puerto Rican students who enter high school never finish, compared with 17 percent of non-Hispanic white students.*

The Hispanic students who leave school often do so early—before entering the 10th grade.

School personnel must respect the cultures of non-English speaking students, but to succeed in America these youngsters must also learn English as quickly as possible. Some educators believe this can best be accomplished by immersing these youngsters in an English speaking environment with little if any instruction in their native tongue. Many school districts use a variety of immersion programs.

■ **Newcomer High School in San Francisco offers a transitional program for foreign-born 14- to 17-year-olds with a limited knowledge of English. These students receive intensive instruction in English for four periods and bilingual support classes in subjects such as social studies and math for two periods each day. In bilingual classes, the students speak both their native language and English. (Students speaking certain languages, however, receive all of their instruction in English.) Youngsters remain at Newcomer High for a maximum of two semesters. After this time, they are expected to be proficient enough in English and comfortable enough with the American culture to move to their assigned high school or to a community college program. The dropout rate at Newcomer is only 1 percent. A longitudinal study of the program's long-term effects on students enrolled in their assigned high school is underway.**

■ **The Dallas Independent School District offers a language immersion program in 28 secondary schools to serve at-risk students with a limited knowledge of English. "Hispanic students are the most fragile of our population—the first to drop out," said Rosita Apodaca, special assistant to the Dallas superintendent. The district enrolls these students in its High Intensity Language Training (HILT) program, where they receive intensive language instruction in English. To learn subjects like social studies and science, they also take "sheltered content courses." These classes, which only enroll their non-English speaking peers, are taught solely in English.**

Dallas has found that the attrition rate of students enrolled in the HILT program has decreased substantially. The HILT model is also being used in other Texas school districts. Of the Hispanic students enrolled in a HILT program in one west Texas district, only 25 percent dropped out—far lower than the national Hispanic average. Moreover, the HILT graduates enrolled in traditional high school programs do as well as native English-speakers. The National School Boards Association has recognized HILT for its achievements.

Other educators favor bilingual classes for non-English speaking students.

■ **The New Arrival Center at Hartford Public High School is one of the few Chapter 1 programs in the country where students with limited English skills can receive intensive remedial help in basic skills in their native language before being placed in a bilingual program. The program is primarily designed for newly arrived limited English proficient students. They are taught in small groups and are tutored in English and in math. The program aims to cushion the cultural shock and disorientation these students might otherwise experience.**

■ **Seattle's Proyecto Saber program was set up to help the district's Chicano and Latino students, 40 percent of whom drop out of school. Participants are tutored in basic skills, receive personal counseling, and attend classes on Latino history and culture. Instruction is provided in both English and Spanish. The program retains 90 percent of its 250 students. School officials attribute the program's success to two factors. First, the bilingual staff has established good relationships with students and parents. Second, the program serves students from kindergarten all the way through 12th grade.**

Unlike Seattle, many districts are unable to provide bilingual instruction beyond elementary school because they cannot recruit enough qualified bilingual teachers. Some superintendents believe that restricting bilingual instruction to grade schools can make the transition into high school particularly hard for Hispanic students. Furthermore, they believe it handicaps youngsters who do not enter American schools until after elementary school. Hartford Superintendent Herman LaFontaine explains:

> *Migration . . . causes many Hispanic students to come to our secondary schools with limited or no knowledge of English. It is essential . . . that programs specially designed for limited English proficient students be available in our middle and high schools. Concentrated programs in English as a second language as well as content area instruction in the native language should be provided whenever possible.*

Evaluations show that good programs for non-English speaking students can, indeed, reduce the dropout rate. Boston found that Hispanic students enrolled in its bilingual program were more apt to remain in school. Twenty-one percent of those in bilingual programs dropped out of school, compared with an overall Hispanic dropout rate of 52 percent. Boston officials speculate that this could be because bilingual programs incorporate many elements thought to decrease the overall dropout rate: teacher and parent involvement, small classes, and individualized instruction.

Compensatory Education Programs

Compensatory education programs have helped many low-income students, whose backgrounds often leave them bereft of the opportunities available to privileged youngsters. Title 1 and Chapter 1 programs have provided $27 billion in federal funds from 1980 to 1986. Local districts have used most of the money to provide extra language and mathematics classes in schools in low-income neighborhoods. The programs generally pull elementary students out of the regular classes for part of the day to receive the additional instruction. However, recent research suggests that in-class remedial programs are equally valuable (Williams, Richmond, & Mason, 1986).

Evaluations of Title 1 and Chapter 1 programs show that they help disadvantaged students to make moderate gains in academic achievement. Evidence does not exist,

however, to link these programs directly with a lower dropout rate, except perhaps as a secondary effect of raised achievement.

Work Experience Programs

Work experience programs motivate some students to remain in school until they graduate. By providing them with entry-level job skills and paid employment, these programs enable at-risk students to see the tangible rewards of a high school education at the same time they are trained for an occupation. These programs also provide academic instruction.

■ **Since its creation in 1969, Philadelphia's High School Academies Program has motivated thousands of inner-city high school students to complete their education while learning marketable skills. The district works with business and industry to help provide youngsters in 10 high schools with a comprehensive educational program. Participants attend academic classes and are trained for careers in automotive mechanics, electronics, business, or health. The program also provides students with paid jobs after school and during the summer in the school's in-house factory or in industry and places students in full-time positions after graduation. From 1985 to 1987, the Academies nearly doubled their annual enrollments from 750 to 1,400. Almost all enrollees complete the program, and from 85 to 90 percent of those who do are placed in full-time jobs, enter the military, or continue their education.**

■ **Cincinnati's Occupational Work Adjustment Program is a year-long program for 14- and 15-year-olds. These adolescents have failed to achieve with the regular curriculum, but they are thought to be capable of learning if presented with meaningful materials. Participants work with an "occupational work adjustment" teacher for at least 80 minutes each day to receive work-related and individualized remedial instruction in math, reading, language arts, social studies, or science. They explore career possibilities, enroll in at least two academic classes each day, and also work either in school or in the private sector for at least 80 minutes each day.**

The results? A recent evaluation found that participants' attendance increased an average of 10 percent over the previous year, while suspensions decreased 48 percent. Eighty percent increased their grade-point average by a minimum of one letter grade, and 79 percent of the students completing the program eventually graduated from high school.

■ **Baltimore, working with the American Can Foundation and the National Crime Prevention Council, created the Security Education Employment Program. Students who are at least 18 years old and who do not have criminal records can complete their high school academic requirements while participating in com-**

munity service activities. These include Operation ID, neighborhood block watches, and programs for installing smoke detectors, all of which allow participants to train for security and crime prevention jobs. Since its inception in 1985, the program has served 81 students, all of whom have been placed in either full- or part-time jobs in their field.

Another program in Baltimore, the Harbor City Learning Center's Forestry Program, is cosponsored by the public schools and the mayor's office. Twenty students enrolled in the program receive academic instruction and experiences such as maintaining parks and working in outdoor education centers. Student attendance rates are good to excellent, and participants' job performance ratings are good. Requests for students' services exceed the number of available students.

Work experience and compensatory programs, as well as magnet and alternative schools and programs for non-English speaking students, can all help to address the dropout problem. Educators are in the best position to plan and oversee some of these programs. But in many cases school officials alone cannot and should not be expected to do so. For this reason, collaborative efforts are needed.

6. Initiate Collaborative Efforts

Urban superintendents believe the dropout problem belongs not only to the schools, but to communities, towns, cities, States, and to the Nation. Cleveland Superintendent Alfred Tutela explains:

> *I can't solve the dropout problem until I have the people talking to me who are party to the problem. Most of my dropouts are on public assistance, so I need the public assistance program to tell me how they're going to support my efforts.*

A growing number of people, organizations, and institutions together are developing strategies to hold youngsters in school until they graduate. Many of their efforts greatly enhance the chance for at-risk students to stay in school.

Parents, the juvenile justice system, religious organizations, social service agencies, youth employment and training programs, policymakers, businesses, and industry can each offer invaluable expertise and resources. A creative summer school program for dropout-prone youngsters may be easy enough for a school district, working alone, to plan and to administer. But health professionals and the juvenile justice system may also need to get into the act with a dropout prevention program aimed at chemically dependent teens, and support from businesses is essential when a work-study program is created.

Collaborative efforts have also encouraged districts to evaluate which services to provide and which to leave to nonschool agencies. Tight budgets have forced some schools to rely more on outside resources, even when this means sharing administrative authority.

■ **The New Orleans Public Schools and the City of New Orleans jointly operated four truancy centers during the 1985–86 school year. These centers help to reduce truancy, improve attendance, and reduce daytime juvenile crimes committed during school hours. Truancy officers and policemen on duty apprehended truant students and transported them to the nearest center to be counseled by a staff social worker. The officers and policemen then contacted the students' parents and returned 55 percent of the 2,687 youngsters they picked up to their home school. Another 21 percent were referred to the district or to external agencies for further counseling. Because the city council and business community objected strongly when the program was not funded during the 1986–87 school year, three truancy centers will operate during the 1987–88 school year.**

■ **The Milwaukee schools and the Department of Social Services of Milwaukee County cooperate on Project Excel, which provides education and special services for 80 delinquent youngsters. The offenses are generally nonviolent ones such as car theft, robbery, or vandalism. Juvenile court judges decide whether to place a youngster in Project Excel as an alternative to a residential security institution. The school system provides three teachers for each of two centers, and the county provides from four to six support staff.**

Milwaukee school officials feel the strength of Project Excel lies in its ability to provide an educational program consistent with what participants will receive if they eventually return to a regular school. Furthermore, the program's price tag is less than half of the $32,000 to $33,000 spent per youngster for a year in a residential institution.

School, Community, and Business Partnerships

Schools, communities, and businesses have forged partnerships to reduce the dropout rate in many major American cities. Schools and businesses have formed compacts; businesses have "adopted" schools; businessmen and businesswomen serve as mentors to students and provide them with scholarships. Specifics of the programs vary, but they accomplish many of the same goals. They provide at-risk students with emotional and financial support, they offer incentives to attend school, and they introduce youngsters to the world of work.

■ **The Boston Compact provides a sterling example of a partnership in which the schools got the entire city to accept partial responsibility for the dropout problem and to commit human and financial resources to solve it. The Compact differs from similar programs in two main ways. First, the Boston schools have a formal agreement with nearly 350 Boston businesses to raise student achievement, improve attendance, and reduce high school dropout rates by 5 percent per year. In return, the business community has agreed to provide summer jobs, part-time jobs during the school year, and permanent jobs to Boston high school graduates. Second, each Boston principal, working with his or her staff, has developed plans to help each school meet the partnership goals. Data collected thus far indicates that the student retention rate has not changed appreciably, but student achievement and attendance have improved dramatically, and the business community is fulfilling its agreement to hire full- and part-time students.**

■ **The Atlanta schools run Rich's Academy in renovated space on top of the department store of the same name. This academy is viewed as a school of last resort for students who have tangled with the juvenile justice system and have been suspended or expelled. "In their previous school lives, many of them were occasional 'drop-ins' who tended to be disruptive influences on everyone else in the school," explained James M. Zimmerman, Rich's chairman. "Now they are graduating, finding jobs, even going to college. What makes the difference? Simply put, the students know that we care," Zimmerman said.**

Students enroll in small classes. Store management personnel serve as mentors. Each participant receives immediate attention if his or her grades drop. And since nonschool problems often impede a student's academic progress, counselors work with teachers and parents to help these youngsters manage everything from pregnancy to legal problems. Houston offers a similar program in Foley's department store.

■ **The Dade County Public Schools, working with the Private Industry Council and the South Florida Employment and Training Consortium, set up a program to increase youth employment and graduation rates of at-risk 9th and 10th graders. Students in three schools participating in the pilot project receive remedial instruction and are counseled individually and in groups. Social service agencies provide family counseling, and students also receive mentors to guide them in developing career goals. The program has improved participants' school attendance, conduct, and academic achievement at the same time they learn job skills. Because of its success, the program is being offered in 10 more schools during the 1987–88 school year.**

In some communities, businesses have become not only job providers, but partners in dropout prevention planning.

■ **The Detroit Public Schools, with a grant from the Ford Foundation, appointed a blue ribbon committee comprising Detroit's leading citizens to design a comprehensive dropout plan. The committee recommended the district expand its data base to help identify potential dropouts early and to match them with appropriate programs. It suggested the district collect information to learn why students drop out. It analyzed the current dropout prevention efforts, developed a new comprehensive prevention plan, and recommended ways to evaluate it.**

■ **The Portland Leaders Roundtable Planning Project, comprising more than 80 business and civic leaders, educators, and human-service providers, developed specific plans to reduce school dropouts, increase at-risk students' employment skills, and provide these youngsters with better access to jobs. Poor students and racial minorities were the Roundtable's main targets. To help these youngsters, the Roundtable implemented many programs, all requiring the entire community to participate. For example, the Financial Academy provides students with mentors from businesses and teaches them skills they can use in various careers. Other programs include a pilot project involving prenatal care and health and human service agencies; before- and after-school programs involving the schools, city and county leaders, and businesses; and programs to improve student attendance involving parents, community members, employers, and school officials.**

■ **San Diego established a Dropout Prevention and Recovery Round Table to draw up a long-term, comprehensive, dropout prevention plan. Representatives from business, local government, universities, and the community met with members of advisory committees to the superintendent, students, the PTA, and school staff. Round Table task forces studied dropout prevention in elementary and secondary schools; how to lure dropouts back to school; how to coordinate existing programs and services for at-risk students; community involvement; and research and evaluation needs. Round Table recommendations adopted by the school board are embodied in a 3-year dropout prevention program. Some of the recommendations are already being carried out. For instance, a deputy superintendent has**

been assigned to coordinate dropout prevention efforts. And the district is working with local teacher colleges to help them prepare future teachers to work with at-risk students.

Involving Parents

Urban superintendents agree that involving parents is crucial to keeping students in school. Parents who encourage their children to succeed in school beginning in the early years exert a powerful influence over who stays and who leaves. Unfortunately, the bond between school and home is characteristically weak for potential dropouts. Moreover, school officials find it hard to develop ways to involve parents because a growing number do not speak English, cannot read in any language, and lack a formal education. Often, cultural differences and language barriers alienate these parents from school. In addition, more women, who traditionally have provided the connection between home and school, are now in the labor force and have a difficult time attending PTA meetings and conferences with the child's teacher. Adolescent parents, who are still young and immature when their children enter school, are increasing in number. More potential dropouts today lack a clear legal guardian. So what can be done?

The urban superintendents believe the link between home and school must be forged early—preferably in preschool, before the high-risk students' problems have enlarged. The superintendents recognize that the parent is the child's first and most influential teacher. Many school districts have designed ways to reach parents and involve them directly in keeping students in school. Some schedule conferences before work or conduct telephone conferences in the evening. Some offer classes to teach parents to read. Some use electronic telephone calling systems to let parents know when their children are absent.

■ **A Denver elementary school and a local community college together provide classes to parents at their children's school. In the program's first year, more than 150 parents enrolled in remedial, GED, and English-as-a-second-language classes.**

Often the support staff—social workers, counselors, and psychologists—intervene to reach parents. Some districts require counselors to contact parents after their children have been absent for 5 or more days. Some have developed guidelines that explain responsibilities for parents. Others visit the homes of students who leave school without requesting a transfer. Some urban educators believe that allowing parents to help make education decisions increases the likelihood that their children will remain in school.

■ **"We have found that the greatest success in influencing students who are at risk of dropping out . . . has come when their parents are . . . intimately involved in programs to help them," Hartford Superintendent Hernan LaFontaine said. This was one reason that Paul Copes, principal at Hartford's Weaver High School,**

spent much of one summer meeting individually with the parents of students on the verge of leaving school. Copes helped these parents to realize the severity and urgency of their children's problems. This personal attention also signaled to parents that the school was genuinely concerned in involving them in the design of educational programs for their children.

■ **Hawaii's Early Provisions for School Success program provides help to kindergarten students with limited English skills. The program involves parents in several ways: It supplies them with home-learning materials, offers parent education workshops, and keeps them informed by sending home newsletters and bulletins. An evaluation showed that 91 percent of the parents believed they were better informed of their child's academic progress, 84 percent understood their child's emotional development better, and 73 percent carried out the home-learning activities suggested in parent packets and in monthly calendars.**

■ **Dallas' Chapter 1 program has a parent ombudsman who evaluates the needs of parents and explains them to school officials. The ombudsman guides parents in such areas as appropriate discipline and home-learning activities. The ombudsman also contacts parents if their child's attendance is poor, finds medical help for students, and will even track down food and clothing for parents in an economic bind.**

Coping with Teen Pregnancy

A joint effort is also required to cope with teen pregnancy. In the past, schools viewed this problem as falling within the domain of the home and the community. Some educators continue to believe that schools should not become involved in this issue. However, most districts believe they must address it, since such an overwhelming percentage of teenage mothers leave school before graduating.

Today, most districts provide human development programs to help students learn about their physical and emotional growth. These classes may start in the early grades and continue through high school. Schools also serve teens who are about to become or are parents. This area is controversial, and varied approaches are being tried in different districts. Some districts, together with city health departments or other agencies, run school clinics, most of which operate with nonschool funds. Information from Hartford and Philadelphia indicate that pregnant students who receive support and services are less apt to drop out. Most districts also offer programs within the regular schools or have established separate schools for pregnant students. Some provide both.

■ **Baltimore's Laurence G. Paquin School provides pregnant teenagers with the chance to complete or continue their education. Its 1,000 students, who range in age from 11 to 20, receive personalized instruction in small classes. Teachers, guidance counselors, and social workers help participants to develop personally, solve conflicts, build self-esteem, strengthen academic skills, make realistic career**

choices, and develop job skills. Students also learn about prenatal care, human reproduction, and child care. An on-site infant-toddler facility serves as an observatory, practicum, resource, and demonstration center. Students remain at Paquin for about 6 months, after which they usually return to their regular school. Paquin does not grant degrees; students who complete graduation requirements receive their diplomas from their home school.

In Philadelphia, pregnant students can stay in the regular school or attend a special program providing individualized instruction and health and social services. Pittsburgh's program, housed in an alternative school, allows pregnant teens to attend some regular school classes and have some separate ones.

Child Care at School

Many districts offer child care at school because this often prevents adolescents with children from dropping out. In Detroit, 71 percent of the pregnant girls who dropped out of school said in a survey that they would return if free child care were provided. Philadelphia and Milwaukee provide day care for children and counseling for both mothers and fathers.

■ **Albuquerque's New Futures School has served pregnant teens and adolescent parents since 1970. Almost half of its 450 students, who range from 12 to 20 years old, have previously dropped out of school. Participants, who on average read at the sixth grade level, study subjects required for a high school diploma. Training that leads to a high school equivalency exam is available to students who are too far behind in credits to earn a traditional diploma. Other classes cover everything from what to eat while pregnant to what mothers can do to help their infants develop into healthy and emotionally adjusted children. Counseling, health services, and child care are available on site.**

The district recently completed a followup study of students who attended the New Futures School from 1980 to 1985. Seventy-three percent of the respondents had graduated from high school, and another 4 percent were still in high school. Fifty-four percent had received postsecondary education or training.

Media Campaigns

Many urban superintendents believe media campaigns may help reduce the dropout rate, although no research exists on their impact. Nevertheless, several school districts have used radio spots and poster campaigns to lower the dropout rate.

■ **The Detroit Public Schools and a local public television station recently produced a 1-hour documentary, "Sidewalk High," about the district's dropout**

problem. Following this broadcast, the station televised a massive town meeting that used telephones to hook the station up with audiences in 22 high schools.

Chicago hired an advertising agency to develop more positive images of the city's public schools. The agency produced a televised public service announcement, which invites community residents to volunteer in their neighborhood schools and urges all Chicagoans to take an interest in the public schools. The mayor of Miami is writing every high school student a personal note saying how important it is to stay in school—the same message he conveys in school visits.

Conclusion

These strategies cannot provide a complete solution to the dropout problem, but they offer an important start. Armed with the best information available and ample practical experience, the Urban Superintendents Network has launched an all-out attack on the dropout problem. They hope this booklet will spur all those who share their concerns to join with them. They also hope it will initiate grassroots action all across the country, because they recognize that the most effective dropout prevention programs are tailored by each community to suit its own students' needs.

The decision to remain in school can profoundly influence many youngsters' lives. It certainly did for one student enrolled in the Los Angeles Unified School District's Options Program at Odyssey High School, which teaches at-risk students who have failed in traditional academic programs. In his graduation speech, entitled "The Great Comeback," this grateful participant explained:

> *It's really hard to believe where I stand right now. I know a lot of my teachers at South Gate High School wouldn't believe it. I owe it to everyone at Odyssey High School. At South Gate I felt I was a nobody. They would just look at me and say, "This guy is going to be a bum." The day finally came when they transferred me to Odyssey. At first I really didn't want to go. I thought it would be the same as South Gate. I was thinking of just dropping out of school. After all, I had a total of only 35 credits and was still in 9th grade. Now I know I was wrong. Odyssey is not just a high school; it's a family. A family loves and cares for one another, and that's what Odyssey does. Everyone at Odyssey helped me a lot. They never gave up on me; they stood behind me all the way. Odyssey really turned me around and I'm glad. Also my reading and writing weren't so great before. Now I'm one of the top readers and writers of the school. I really would like to thank everyone at Odyssey. Thanks for helping me make a great comeback. I love you all!*

The national dropout rate will not decrease overnight. The complex problems that give rise to it defy simple solutions and quick fixes. The droves of students that leave our schools demand our attention. Nothing less than a full commitment of our energy, time, and resources will enable us to eradicate this problem. Only a united and comprehensive effort will allow America's children to look forward to a brighter future.

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The Urban Superintendents Network is a representative group of public school administrators from major cities throughout the Nation. Under the sponsorship of the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI), these superintendents meet several times a year with OERI staff, educational researchers, and practitioners to consider issues relevant to urban education, react to Department of Education plans, and consider ways research findings can be used to solve practical problems in schools. Through such activities, superintendents are able to exchange information, benefit from each other's experiences, and explore urban perspectives on major educational issues. This publication is a product of the superintendents' work in their network meetings over the last year and a half.

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